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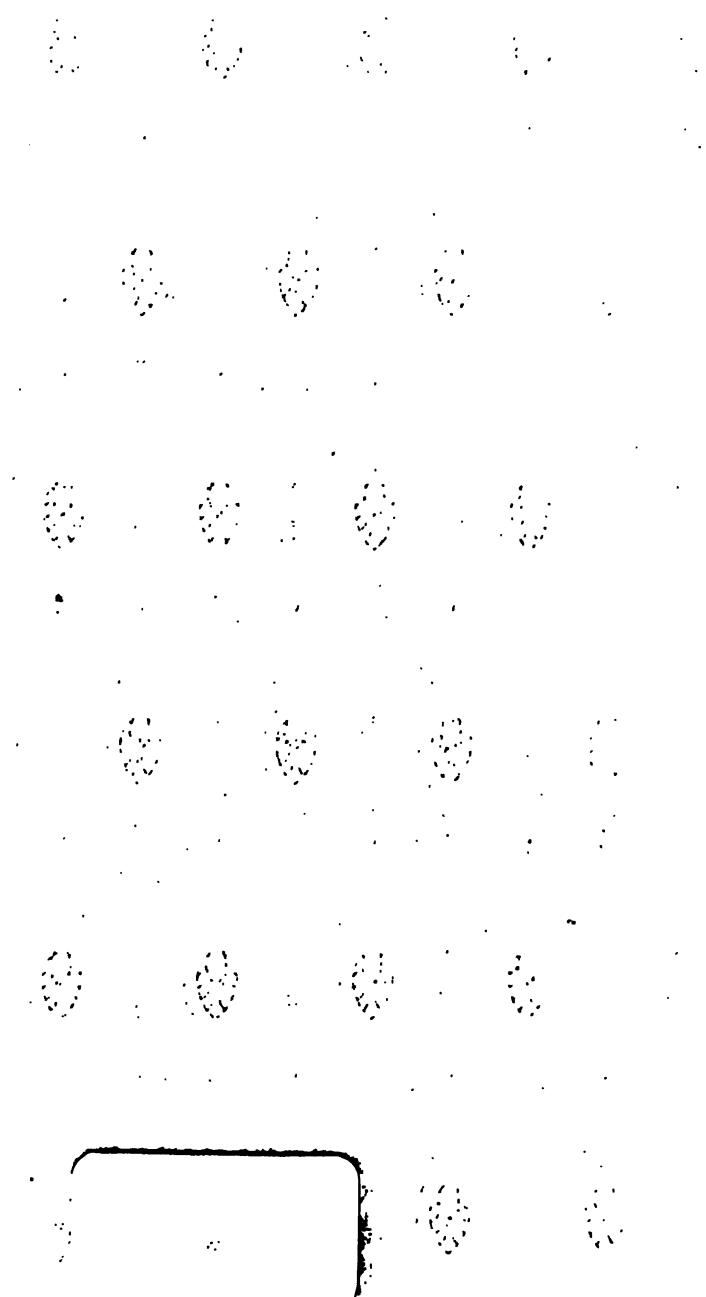
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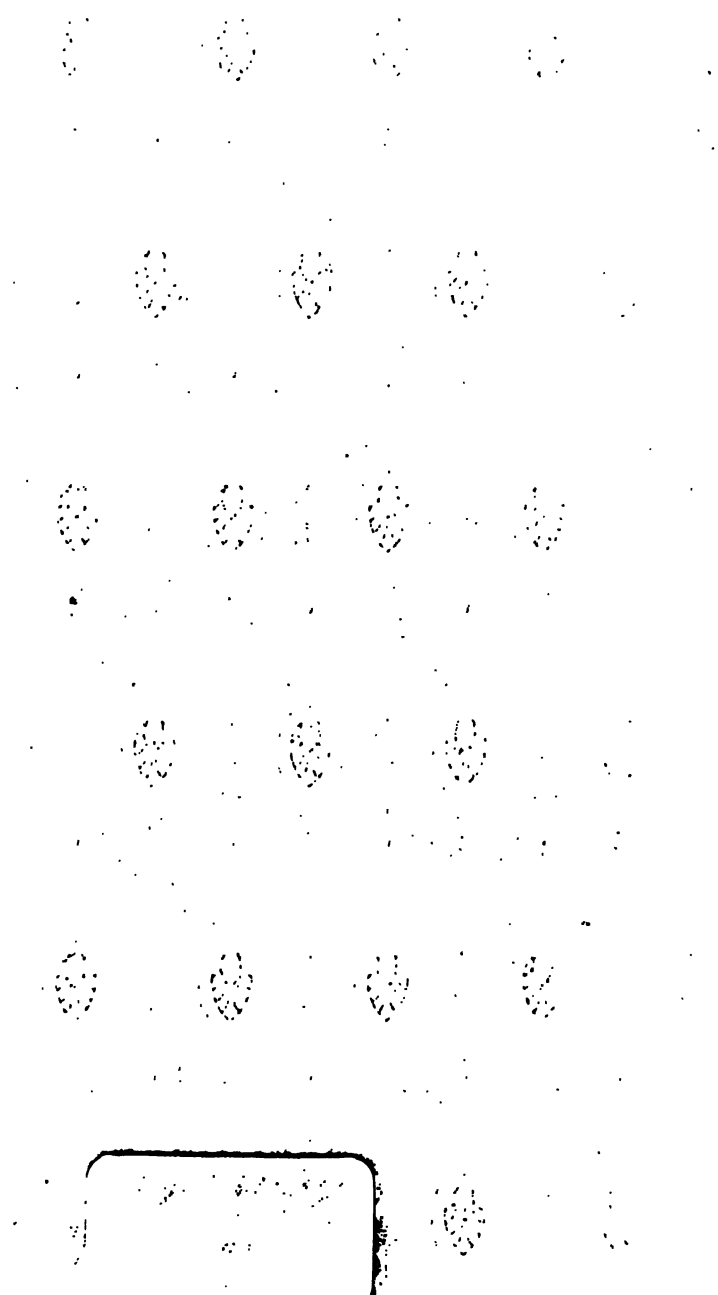


A WESTERN WILDFLOWER











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A

WESTERN WILDFLOWER.

BY

KATHARINE LEE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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A

WESTERN WILDFLOWER.



CHAPTER I.

WHERE," said the Archdeacon, as he came in to breakfast, "is Joyce? Why was she not at prayers?"

"I don't know, dear," said Mrs. Hyde, as she poured out the tea; "girls, have you seen anything of her?"

"I looked in her room," said Blanche, "before we came down, and she was not there."

"Have you been there again since?" asked her father.

"Yes, papa; I went again after prayers. I think she has gone out."

"And where is Robert?" asked Mrs. Hyde, noticing his empty place.

"Gone for a walk with Joyce, I expect," said Flo. "They are always fond of romping about before breakfast."

This was said in a very low tone to Mrs. Hyde, but Walter caught it.

"Florence," he said gravely, "I am astonished to hear you use such an expression with regard to your cousin. Joyce may require training, but I, at least, have never seen her do anything so unladylike as to romp."

Flo made no reply, for her father had looked up from his toast and paper and appeared to be listening; so she contented herself by darting an angry glance at her



brother, and finished her breakfast in dignified silence.

"Hey, what!" said the Archdeacon; "did you say you knew, Walter?"

"No," replied his son; "I was merely correcting an erroneous expression of Flo's. I have not seen Joyce since last night."

"You don't look as if your fishing agreed with you," said the Archdeacon, looking at him; "you are pale this morning, Walter. You mustn't carry a libel upon our Charrington air back to Oxford, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You didn't get your feet wet, I hope?" inquired his mother anxiously.

"I changed my shoes," he said, rather annoyed at the public interest he was exciting. "I am quite well. But I wonder where Joyce and Bob can be."

"Yes, yes; they really ought not to be going out in this way," said the Arch-

deacon rather snappishly, as he ran his eye down a report of "A Ritualistic Priest Unmasked," in the county paper. "Pshaw! what nonsense this is! Really, really, this ignorance and perversion is surprising! Mamma, you must speak seriously to that girl, and to Bob too, when they come in. I cannot have this disrespect shown to morning prayers; and now I think of it, she was not present last night. Too bad, too bad! mamma, this is really—you must see to it as soon as they come in." And gathering up the offending paper, the Arch-deacon went back to his study.

Presently he opened the door again and called out:

"Mamma! send Joyce to me when she comes in!"

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. Hyde in trepidation, "I wonder what there was in that horrid paper to upset papa so! He was



quite different when he came in. And how unfortunate for those children to be out to-day !”

“ Isn’t Sir Ethelred coming this morning ?” asked Flo, with an assumption of contemptuous indifference, as she leant back in her chair.

“ Yes, I believe so—at twelve o’clock, I think. We must ask him to stay to lunch, I suppose ?”

“ Of course, mamma,” said Blanche ; “ don’t you remember we planned the ducks to come to-day, instead of yesterday, on purpose. I hope there are some peas left.”

“ I think I will go and see about them,” said Mrs. Hyde, rising. “ Blanche, will you tell Emma to keep some breakfast hot.”

“ They don’t deserve any !” said Flo tartly.

"Oh, but, my dear, they will be so hungry," said her mother; "I think it had better be kept a little while, at least. I do hope they will come in time for church, or papa will be *so* vexed."

The family separated and went their various ways, until about ten, when they all set forth in detachments to go to church.

Still no Joyce, and no Bob.

The Archdeacon's brow was heavy as he cast his sharp eyes over his little congregation when he entered the reading-desk and noted the missing members of his flock.

It being Wednesday, and the service at half-past ten instead of ten, and having the addition of the Litany to the usual morning prayers, the two Miss Sacketts attended, and were the only purely secular representatives of the parish.

They came out with the Rectory people



and stood talking with them, but did not walk on, for they were bent upon a mushroom expedition in the fields by the river.

Mrs. Hyde acquainted them with the mysterious absence of her niece and Robert, adding, however, that she hoped to find them at home.

"Dear me! so full of spirit!" said Miss Sackett, "quite, one may say, adventurous—before breakfast, too!"

"Yes," added Miss Mary, "yet so very charming, and Mr. Robert, too—to the marshes, I dare say. Such an attraction for young people."

"So glad to have seen you, but mustn't keep you now, and an appointment as you say. So very nice, and my very best wishes and congratulations, I am sure, if not a liberty, though not quite what we desired either, but still so very!"

"Everything most delightful, I am sure,

and best possible wishes and it might be shyness now, most natural of course, at meeting everybody on such a day," said Miss Mary.

"Dear me, how stupid of us all!" cried Mrs. Hyde, delighted. "Of course that is the reason the dear child has gone away; how very, very stupid of us! I am so glad you mentioned it, and I do *hope* she will have something to eat before she sees him. I must hurry home directly."

"Of course, so natural," said Miss Sackett, "and so young. Dear me, it's all very nice, isn't it?" and Miss Sackett actually wiped her wrinkled eyes at the thought of the happy episode then taking place in the lives around her.

"If not an intrusion," said Miss Mary, similarly affected, "would so like to call on our way home, are calling on the Badcocks. You know they have come back to Dow-



ston, and mushrooms in such quantities you can hardly walk, but the permission so kind all the same."

"And I am sure if a basketful would be acceptable, nothing could give more pleasure," said Miss Sackett.

"Thank you so much," said Mrs. Hyde, "but you must call anyway; and I really must hurry now, and there is the Arch-deacon at last. Good-bye, good-bye."

"Good-bye, and all best wishes, good-bye," echoed the two ladies, as they watched Mrs. Hyde's round figure toiling up the hill beside her husband's rapid strides.

Mrs. Hyde mentioned the Miss Sacketts' suspicion to her husband.

"Well, well, it may be so!" he said, "but I don't at all approve of this neglect of prayers and service. She must be spoken to on the subject. It must not occur again."

As they neared the Rectory they met

Bob coming at full run towards them, and in spite of his exertion, looking so alarmed and anxious, that Mrs. Hyde cried out on seeing him. He held a letter in his hand, which he gave his father, and could hardly gasp out the words :

“She’s gone !”

“Gone ! what do you mean ?” asked his father sternly.

Bob only pointed to the letter, and ejaculated feebly :

“Jane found it, in her room, just now.”

The Archdeacon tore it open, and the envelope fell fluttering to the ground. Mrs. Hyde picked it up, and held it, scarcely knowing what she did in the agitation caused by Bob’s words.

“Oh, Laurence, what is it ?” she cried, as he turned over the first page of the letter.

To her terror and dismay he placed the



letter in her hands, and without a word strode on towards the Rectory. His face was very white, as if a blow had sent the blood away from it, and she even fancied she saw tears in his eyes.

“Oh, Robert!” the poor woman cried, wringing her hands together; “what is it, what is it?” and she started off after her husband, forgetting even the letter in her anxiety to be near him in the trouble she saw had come upon him.

Bob picked up the letter she had dropped, and came after her reading it to her in jerky bits as he strode beside her. She scarcely seemed to comprehend the words, her attention was so fixed upon the fast-moving black figure before her, with the long skirts of the archidiaconal coat flapping like wings at every step. She gathered from Bob’s incoherent words that Joyce was gone. How or where was not the

question then, so much as how this blow would affect her husband.

“Oh, she must be brought back!” she cried. “Do, Robert, go round and ask Broadwood to lend you his fast pony, and search everywhere for her. She can’t have gone far. It must be only a naughty trick of hers. No girl would seriously run away. It is very, very naughty of her. Go now, dear, at once; I can overtake papa alone. It must be only a naughty trick to frighten us. Go at once.”

Bob, nothing loath to escape his parents, and filled with a terrible misgiving that this was the result of Joyce’s last midnight exploration, and that she was indeed far beyond his reach, started off at full speed, while Mrs. Hyde hurried on after her husband.

She did not overtake him, for he was a fast walker, and she had been better able



to keep up with him before she weighed fourteen stone, so she found that he had had ample time to spread confusion and dismay in the minds of his three daughters by uttering as he passed into his study the words :

“Joyce is lost !”

They were all standing in the hall as he came in, and the sight of his face would have been terrifying enough without his words. None of them dared to approach the door of his study, which he had closed after him, or even to remain in the hall whispering among themselves, but they came out in the porch and looked anxiously for their mother.

“Oh, girls, have you heard ?” she gasped, as they came towards her ; “poor papa, where is he ?”

“In the study,” said Flo. “Mamma, what is it ?”

“ Oh, I hardly know, dears ; but it must be only a naughty trick. She could never mean to really run away. I must go to papa,” she added, passing on and leaving them staring at one another in surprise.

Eanswith was the first to recover herself and to move indoors, saying contemptuously :

“ Nonsense ! Joyce run away indeed ! She is only hiding.”

“ Of course,” said Blanche, as a light seemed to break in upon her. “ Why, Sir Ethelred is coming directly. How very, very naughty of her !”

“ Insanely babyish,” said Flo, with a heightened colour, as she turned away.

They all went into the dining-room and closed the door.

“ I wonder how papa and mamma knew ?” said Blanche.

“ Oh, she bribed Bob to spread the re-



port," said Flo. • "I believe Bob is up to some mischief over at the Badcocks'. He is constantly there, I know, and never owns to it ; and I dare say Joyce has found it out and threatened to tell of him if he did not help her in this scrape."

"But why should she want to pretend she ran away?" said the practical Blanche. "It only makes everybody angry for nothing."

"You can't expect me to follow the workings of that girl's mind," said Flo pettishly. "How should I possibly know what she meant or didn't mean? What she does is all we can go by, and that is bad enough, I am sure."

"I believe she has run away," said Eanswith suddenly.

Both her sisters looked at her in astonishment.

"Why?" asked Flo.

"Because I saw her go," said Eanswith coolly. "I heard a noise early this morning, and I looked out of my window and saw Joyce standing by the door of the farm-yard looking back at the house. She had her ulster and straw hat on, and a bundle in her arms. I thought she was going for a walk, and was waiting for Bob, so I went back to bed again."

"Why didn't you tell papa about it at breakfast?" asked Blanche.

"He didn't ask me," returned Eanswith; "besides, there was nothing to tell. We all thought she had gone for a walk."

"There was the bundle," said Flo.

"I didn't think of that. In fact, I thought very little about it; Joyce did not interest me particularly;" and Eanswith moved towards the door.

"But where can she have gone?" said

Blanche. "She doesn't know anyone to go to."

"Oh, she will be back again to-night," said Flo. "We may be sure of that. Why should she want to go away? it is ridiculous!"

"Oh, girls, girls!" cried poor Mrs. Hyde, coming into the room, her round face covered with tears, and despair in her tones. "Oh, what shall we do? It is so dreadful, and papa does feel it so terribly. Oh, how could she be so wicked!"

"What! has she really gone?" asked the girls, closing round their mother, as she sank into a chair.

"Yes, dears, really; leaving the most cruel letter behind her—all about her father. I am sure none of us ever so much as mentioned him to her—did we, dears?"

"No, indeed," they chimed in chorus; while Flo added:

"We don't know enough of him to mention."

"Just so, dears ; and I am sure I don't know what more we could have done for her. She was treated quite like one of ourselves, quite. And then the publicity of it is so dreadful. Papa says we must tell the *police* ! Oh dear, oh dear, only think of that !" and Mrs. Hyde wept aloud.

"Oh, mamma, this is dreadful !" said Blanche sympathisingly, while Flo added :

"Don't cry, mamma. We are sure to find her."

"Oh, but the disgrace of it," sobbed Mrs. Hyde, "the disgrace of a girl's running away like that ! Nobody will ever speak to her again. It is ruin for her, and the disgrace to us in having such a niece, the disgrace of a girl's running away from our house ! Why people will actually think we were *cruel* to her," and Mrs. Hyde wept afresh.

"Oh no, nobody could think that," said Blanche; "don't cry so dreadfully, mamma."

"Nobody is likely to lay much stress on what Joyce says or does, I imagine," said Eanswith.

"Then there is papa," sobbed the poor lady. "I never saw him so crushed by anything. He actually talks of going abroad! Says he cannot bear the disgrace! Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful! and nobody knows what will become of the poor child, or what dreadful, dreadful stories will be said of her! It is the most horrible thing that ever happened in all the world!"

"There is papa going out," said Flo, who stood by the window. "No, he is coming back again. Oh, mamma, here is Sir Ethelred!"

"Oh dear, dear, dear!" sobbed Mrs. Hyde. "Oh, what shall we say to him? Oh, what will he think? What will every-

body think ? Was there ever anything so dreadful ?”

“ He is gone into the study with papa,” said Flo, in a tremulous voice. “ Hush, mamma ! they will hear you.”

Sir Ethelred did not remain in the study very long. He had guessed some trouble from the first sight of the Archdeacon’s face, and had read therein the story of his own rejection ; but he was naturally utterly unprepared for the tidings conveyed in a few brief words from the Archdeacon’s lips, and ratified by the letter he placed in the young man’s hands to read.

As he read, Sir Ethelred’s rosy face blanched, and his lips trembled. He had to read the letter through twice before he fully realised its contents. Then he laid it down upon the study-table, and looked with a pale perturbed face at the Archdeacon.

“ It is a great blow to you, a grievous

blow, worse even than it is to us," the elder man said, laying his hand upon the other's shoulder. "The poor, deluded, mistaken child!"

"If—if she had only waited a little while," said Sir Ethelred, his lip still quivering and his face white from the shock. "God knows I would never have tried to force her inclinations. She might have trusted me so far."

"She should have trusted us all," said the Archdeacon gravely. "Ashton, this is a terrible blow to me—a blow in two ways. There is no man in the world I would so soon have given her to as yourself; and now the only question is, how are we to find her?"

"You—you do not think she has destroyed herself?" the young man said, leaning for an instant heavily against the window, as if the idea had been too much for him to bear.

“God forbid!” said the Archdeacon hastily. “I never thought of such a fearful possibility. Give me her letter;” and he read it hastily through again.

“No, no, no!” he said; “there is no hint of such a thing. My poor Julius!—no, no, it cannot be that. She is to be found, and must be found. Ashton, my dear fellow, rouse yourself to help us to look for her. Poor child! poor, mistaken, deluded child!” and the two men hurried out of the house together.





CHAPTER II.

AFTER the Miss Sacketts had parted from Mrs. Hyde, they passed out at the other end of the churchyard by the very same path that Joyce had taken in the early morning. The day had turned out very hot, and the deep shade of the lime-trees and the sombre old yews of the churchyard was far pleasanter than the blazing heat of the dry fields to the two worthy ladies who plodded across them. They were feeling quite excited and sentimental, poor good old souls, at the very sight of the romance that, as they imagined, was being played

before them by Joyce and Sir Ethelred. They had never had any experience of the kind themselves, which perhaps accounted for their ready interest and sympathy with Joyce. Had they had, as most women do have, a tender recollection of their early introduction to a love that had suffered dissolution and disenchantment, their hearts might have been harder, and they themselves more inclined to take a cynical view of the whole situation. As it was, they had lived their simple lives without any such experience, being kept in their youth under the strict watchful eyes of their mother and elder brother, a tyranny lasting in the former person down to within the last few years, when they had buried, amid tears and regrets, her whom they religiously believed to have been the best of mothers. Their liberty had come to them so late in life, and was such an

altogether strange and new experience to them, that they had never got quite used to it, and even now at times felt a curious sense of orphanhood and unguided youthfulness.

So they wiped their eyes again as they came out into the open fields, and Miss Sackett said :

“ Dear me, Mary, to think now of its all happening here ! So strange, is it not ? ”

“ Quite so, Martha. I am sure it has set me all of a flutter, and how the time will go by until the afternoon I don’t know, though the Badcocks’ dinners are always substantial, too.”

“ I hardly know if I feel equal to staying. I am all of a twitteration,” said Miss Sackett, again wiping her eyes, “ not but what I dare say I should feel more if it was dear Flo, for instance ; but, as it is, a dinner is, as you say, a substantial affair,

and really I think a piece of cake and a glass of wine and mushrooms would be more suitable."

"I agree with you, sister, and I am sure I don't feel equal to Mrs. Badcock, let alone Nanny, who they say has grown into a regular beauty, though of course not the style we admire after those dear girls, but a piece of cake far better than staying to dinner."

This conversation brought them to the gate of Dowston, an old-fashioned long stone house, the rooms of which on the ground-floor were all beneath the level of the ground outside. A large mulberry-tree stood in the garden, and on a seat under its branches, Nanny, the daughter of the house, was seated. She was a little round creature, fat and merry-looking, with black rather beady eyes and shining black hair. Her face was rosy and smiling, and she

was altogether a very favourable specimen of the better-looking among the Kentish farmer class. She was neatly dressed in a print gown, and had a basket beside her which she had been filling with mulberries, and her hands and lips were stained with juice of the same fruit.

She rose and came to the gate when she saw the two elderly ladies come up, and opened it for them, saying, in a cheerful hearty voice :

“ Mother will be rarely pleased to see you, Miss Sackett : she’s bin expecting of you all the morning ; for we had a pig killed early, and she allus says somebody’s sure to come, they do, before things are cleaned.”

“ Dear me ! I thought we said to-day. I am so sorry !” said Miss Sackett.

“ Must have made quite a mistake—so unfortunate !” echoed Miss Mary.

"Oh no, not a bit," said the girl with a hearty laugh ; " that's only mother's ways, she allus gets upset like when we kill a pig or a sheep. She's been cleaned and waiting for you this hour or more. Come along in. Have some mulberries; they are rare uns, they are, this year."

"No, thank you, my dear," said Miss Sackett, liking the girl for her outspoken heartiness of manner, and the total absence of all kinds of affectation about her. She would have been better, certainly, for a little more polish; but the Miss Sacketts had lately seen rather too much of that sort of thing upon one or two of their neighbours' daughters, who had come back from fashionable schools so completely transformed that the original stock of Kentish yeomanry had been nearly if not altogether effaced.

"So you have come back from school,"

Miss Martha said, as she followed Nanny into the sitting-room ; “ you are quite a finished young lady now, I suppose.”

“ Such advantages as young people have now,” said Miss Mary ; “ dear me, now I dare say you can play the piano.”

“ Not I !” said Miss Nanny, with another of her hearty laughs—“ not fit to be heard, that is. I can bang it a bit of course, for all the world like the threshing-machine, father says ; and I’m blessed if I wouldn’t sooner pitch up sheaves than twiddle my fingers up and down the pianny ;” and Miss Nanny laughed again.

The two mild old ladies looked at one another. Nanny was so very different from their standard of perfection, yet they could not help liking her all the same.

“ Oh, here’s mother !” the young lady cried, jumping up with a bounce as footsteps were heard coming along the stone passage.

“ I will go and make the mulberry pie ; I shall see you again, I shall, by-and-by ;” and Miss Nanny made her exit.

There was a little mild conversation between the Miss Sacketts and Mrs. Badcock. The latter was a little dark melancholy woman with a habitual whine in her voice, and an aggrieved complaining manner. Times were always bad with Mrs. Badcock, and her life, to judge by her own account, was one long series of unjust persecutions and unmerited sufferings. She was not a very cheerful or pleasant companion, and the Miss Sacketts were relieved when her husband came in from his work for a few minutes’ chat. Miss Nanny certainly “favoured” her father, as the saying is, for he too had bright beady eyes, shining dark hair, and a round jovial face; only in his case the skin had turned to what might almost be called a deep russet, so



tanned and roughened was it by exposure, and his years had brought with them an increase of girth that it was to be hoped Nanny's round buxom little figure would never quite attain to.

He would not hear of the two ladies leaving before the midday dinner, insisting in his bluff good-natured way that they must stay and taste his Nanny's pies. He seemed to think it rather a wonderful thing that his little daughter should take the same keen delight in the farm and dairy work after her year at a fashionable school, where her mother insisted on sending her sorely against his will, and his conversation was largely besprinkled with anecdotes of his "little gal" and her joyful return to farm life.

At dinner, too, Nanny looked very fresh and smiling and rosy, and if a little softness of manner and qualifying of tones had been

more conspicuous she would by no means have been considered an ill-bred girl.

During dinner Miss Sackett, unable any longer to keep from the subject uppermost in her thoughts, asked the farmer if he had seen anything of the Archdeacon lately.

“No, not I,” Mr. Badcock answered, with a short laugh. “The Harsh Deacon don’t trouble hisself about the likes o’ hus much. I reckon most of his time is spent over newspapers and societies and suchlike. Mrs. Hyde and one of the young ladies was over here last week about some butter, or honey, or suchlike—warn’t she, wife?”

“No, it warn’t Mrs. Hyde ; it was that niece and Mr. Robert. They came about some mushrooms ; and why, Badcock, you don’t send them mushrooms more regular to market passes me ! Nanny can pick ’em well enough.”

“I was picking of ’em mornin’ ’fore last,”

said Nanny, suddenly very crimson. "I went out afore the sun was up."

"So you did. You're a good gal," said her father approvingly. "I call to mind now I heard you come in 'fore Alfred was up. You're a fair early riser."

"I don't see what she went out so early for," said Mrs. Badcock pettishly. "Six o'clock is time enough to pick mushrooms."

"I like to be out early," said Nanny, still very red, and trying to hide her confusion by bolting her food with immense rapidity.

"Well, well," said the farmer soothingly, as he saw his wife's brow contracted, "there's no harm in the gal's 'aving the fields all to herself if she has a mind to. Nobody comes by that way so early. Were you out this morning, Nanny?"

"No, father."

"All right, my dear. Every day is too much for you; but I fancied as I heard a

footstep nigh the house, too. Maybe 'twas only the dog. Don't go oftener than you mind to, child."

Here Miss Nanny, who had buried as much of her face as she could get into a tumbler, gave a great choke and a gasp' and was obliged to leave the room in a very flushed and heated condition, with her handkerchief to her mouth.

"She is a good gal," said the farmer, looking after her—"a rare good gal. No nonsense about 'er. You're welcome to the mushrooms, Miss Sackett; and as many of them as you like."

The Miss Sacketts made their acknowledgments, and after a suitable interchange of civilities, they took their way down the great field which sloped to the river in search of the fungi.

They found a great quantity, and soon filled the baskets they had brought with



delicate pink and white spoils, and then decided to go into the little wood and rest for awhile by the stop-gate, where they might find a beam to sit on.

They pushed their way down the little tangled wood as Joyce had done that morning, and as they went they talked of her and the happy lot in store for her, picturing to themselves her wedding, and anxiously debating what form their little wedding gifts should take.

So they chatted on until they reached the stop-gate, and then, finding an old log, they sat down and looked at the swift river and the spreading marshes beyond.

Suddenly Miss Sackett gave a shriek and pointed before her.

"Gracious goodness, what is it, Martha?" cried Miss Mary, jumping up in the belief that her sister had been attacked by an adder. "Where is it? Come away, do!"

"Look there, look there!" cried Miss Sackett, still pointing.

"Where? what is it? Oh, goodness gracious, Martha!"

"It's her hat!" cried the elder lady. And with these words she slid over the log into the bramble-bushes behind.

Miss Mary, in great agitation, caught hold of her and pulled her back, and held her head in her arms, and wept over her, and cried to her to recover, and not to mind, and in the extremity of her distress crammed a handful of mushrooms upon her face in lieu of a smelling-bottle, and slapped her, and tugged at her dress, and did everything that a distracted female does do on such occasions.

Presently Miss Sackett came to herself in spite of the mushrooms over her mouth and nose, and sat up and began to cry, and then Miss Mary had time to recollect

what it was that had upset her sister so much.

“It’s her hat!” sobbed Miss Sackett, in imminent danger of another relapse. “Oh, Mary, she is drowned, drowned! She has not been seen all the morning, you know. Oh dear! oh dear!” and Miss Sackett lurched back again.

“Oh, eat a bit! oh dear, what shall I do?” cried Miss Mary, applying some more mushrooms, with the tears running down her face, and making two long streaks on her black silk jacket. “Oh, Martha, do try! And if only a little water, now—and I might get some in my hands!”

And Miss Mary was preparing to go towards the river, when her sister caught her and held her firmly.

“No, Mary—no, no; I shall be better presently—no water. Oh, Mary, think of what lies there, so young and pretty!”

“ And such happiness before her. Oh, dear, dear !” sobbed Miss Mary, overcome in her turn by the horror of the thought.

“ It must have been an accident,” cried Miss Sackett ; “ she could never, never have wanted to leave the Rectory. Oh, Mary, perhaps she came for mushrooms and slipped in. Here, throw them away directly ;” and the good lady tossed hers, basket and all, into the brambles. “ I’ll never, never touch them again,” she sobbed ; “ poor dear little thing, and so full of spirit too, and so charming, though not like dear Flo.”

And to think of its all turning out like this,” sobbed her sister. “ I declare it is too dreadful ; and her wedding, as you may say, all but done, and so very nice.”

“ We must take it to the Rectory,” said Miss Sackett, trying to dry her eyes. “ The same black straw with the wreath of daisies and buttercups, and so often as

we have admired it, and all her things so stylish, and how to get it out I am sure I don't know."

"What she wore only yesterday to church ; and I am sure I can't touch it ; and the water there ten feet deep, as I have heard."

"And nowhere so rapid as here ; might have carried her right away to Marshsted. Oh, dear, dear, it's so dreadful ! and do you think we could reach it with a stick, Mary ?"

"Oh, I couldn't try for the world ; and no longer ago than yesterday all as usual, as you may say. No, not for worlds !" cried Miss Mary, in extreme terror.

"It must be done," said Miss Sackett, getting up ; "and the only thing we may ever see of hers again, and leave it here I couldn't ; and the Archdeacon must know."

"And Sir—Sir—Sir Ethelred," gasped

Miss Mary, in a fresh burst of tears and sympathy.

Upon which both ladies sat down and cried again. At last they rose, and by means of a stick broken from the coppice, and after much floundering and many hair-breadth escapes of keeping company with the hat in the river, the two ladies drew it to land, and as if it were not wet enough already, set it on the turf before them and each cried a small river into its sodden crown.

When they had rather exhausted themselves by this process, they got up, and each taking a ribbon-string between a finger and thumb—they would on no account have touched the hat itself—made a melancholy little trio up the wood and into the field. The dripping sodden hat in the middle looked scarcely more damp and depressed than the two tender-hearted old maids who

carried it ; their faces streaked and pale from weeping, with the tears still gushing forth at intervals, and their creased and damp garments that had suffered alike from excess of emotion and river mud.

They did not stop at the Badcocks' on their way back ; but Nanny saw them and came running across the field to meet them.

"Why, what is the matter?" she cried. "Miss Sackett, you ain't been and fell in the river, have you?"

"N—n—no," sobbed Miss Sackett, in a fresh gush of tears ; "but—but see this, Nanny—that poor dear, dear, little Joyce—" and Miss Sackett could not go on.

"Why, whatever is it?" asked Nanny, drawing close and speaking in a graver voice.

"She has been l—lost," said Miss Mary, following her sister's example ; "lost all the morning."

"And we—we've found this," said Miss Sackett, giving the least possible movement to the hat in question. "She is drowned—oh dear, oh dear!"

"And Mr. Robert too," cried Miss Mary, burying her face in her wet handkerchief.

The red colour flew out of Nanny's face as if she had been shot. She almost tottered as she stood, but in a tolerably firm voice she asked :

"Not—not drowned?"

"No, I hope not, I am sure," cried Miss Sackett, recovering a little ; "we haven't found his hat, and he would know about the river-banks too well ; but he was lost too, and only think, just as she was going to be married, not that I ought to have said that, but don't mention it again, and it can't matter who knows now—oh dear! oh dear!"

And the two ladies moved on their



mournful way, leaving Nanny, white and still as a stone, standing in the field behind them.

It was dreadful work getting to the Rectory. They met several people on their way of course, and to all of them they told the sad news and showed their mournful relic. These interviews were so often repeated, and their effect was so extremely trying upon the two poor ladies, that they had serious doubts of their ability ever to reach their destination at all; but Miss Sackett's determination conquered all obstacles, and they struggled on bravely in a fearfully collapsed state, consequent on unlimited tears, heat, and excitement.

When they did get to the Rectory they were so completely exhausted that they were obliged to lean, like two eminent statesmen, against the supporting pillars of the porch; and there, holding between them

the hat, the strings of which they had never once relinquished, they were found, like second Niobes, when Jane came to the door.

Her piercing shriek of course alarmed the whole household, and brought the scattered members of the family from far and wide to see what had happened.

What did happen was a thing the stupendous magnitude of which had never entered into the wildest conceptions of the Miss Hydes. An earthquake could not have alarmed them so much, scarcely the day of judgment itself, for they had been familiar with this contingency from their babyhood. But what was beyond all calculation, probability, or even possibility, was enacted before their very eyes on that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon. The Arch-deacon burst into tears !

The young ladies were so overwhelmed



by this exhibition that they neither spoke nor moved, but stood staring with all their eyes, not at Joyce's hat, but at their father, while his great frame shook with emotion. It was something more terrible to them than seeing Joyce's dead body brought in, and her hat faded away into miserable insignificance beside this spectacle of their father's woe.

Presently Blanche, the first to recover herself, whispered, "We ought not to stay here," and they stole away.

There was chaos indeed in the Rectory. The Archdeacon did not go into his study, but sat down on one of the hall-chairs, and wept outright in the face of all men, or rather of the Miss Sacketts, his wife, and Jane, who remained horror-struck behind the front-door.

The Miss Sacketts had believed they could not cry any more ; but judging from

the deluge of tears that poured forth from them now at this spectacle, they had only just begun upon a fresh reservoir. So they cried, and the Archdeacon cried, and Mrs. Hyde cried, and Jane and Emma, the cook, cried, and they all cried, except the three girls, who sat upstairs white and trembling, too frightened to cry, in the drawing-room.

Thus they all were when Sir Ethelred Ashton came through the open door, and if anything could have made the Miss Sacketts cry harder, it was the sight of that poor young man's face as he bent over the wet straw hat with its melancholy wreath of sodden flowers.

He did not say anything at first, neither did he cry. He only looked very, very pale, and presently, in a strange hoarse voice, he said :

“We must get the drags.”



“Walter has gone to Southton to—to see for—for——” sobbed Mrs. Hyde, seeing that he waited for the answer her husband was unfit to give. “Papa has only just come in;” and Mrs. Hyde could say no more.

“I will go back and get my men—all that are not out searching already, that is,” he said, in that same strange voice. “Will you send Bob when he comes in?”

“It—it was at the stop-gate,” said Miss Sackett, in an interval of sobs that were rapidly becoming hysterical.

“Whi—ich was open,” corroborated Miss Mary.

Sir Ethelred thanked them by an inclination of his head and left them, and presently the Archdeacon tottered into his study and shut the door.



CHAPTER III.

IT was the evening after Joyce's disappearance. The Arch-deacon and Sir Ethelred had been for hours beside the stop-gate and along the river anxiously watching the men at work dragging the water. They had even gone as far down into the marshes as Shere Court, thinking that the strong current might have washed the poor girl's body towards the distant sea. But no trace of her had been found, nothing belonging to her but that limp dripping hat, now carefully preserved in the Rectory study.

It was possible that so far non-success meant hope, and that the girl was not drowned after all. Scouts, the most active of whom was Robert, had been scouring the country all day, but no tidings of her were gathered. Robert from the first had been emphatic in rejecting the idea of her being drowned, and had, without saying anything to anyone, immediately started off for Moulbury, to inquire at the station if Joyce had been seen there. He was told that several tickets had been issued for London that morning, as an excursion train had been run to the Cattle Show, and it was impossible to recollect any individual passenger. He made several fruitless inquiries in the town. No one had seen her, or at any rate could recollect her, and, disappointed and baffled, Bob returned to Charrington.

He found Sir Ethelred at the Rectory,

just come back from the river, and the Archdeacon with him. They were both exhausted by their day's work and anxiety, and inclined to receive Bob's account of his search with the dull melancholy of men who had given up hope. The fixed conviction of their minds was that the girl was drowned, and had been washed down the deep strong current and out to sea hours before they began their search.

It was a dismal group assembled in the drawing-room when Bob came in. They were making a feeble pretence of eating something, but nobody had any appetite; only the Archdeacon and Sir Ethelred swallowed cup after cup of tea, apparently as much for the sake of doing something as because they desired such refreshment. They were haggard and white, and the day's events had made the Archdeacon look many years older.

Mrs. Hyde sat on the sofa wiping her eyes and crying quietly the whole time. She had done little else all day, poor woman; and the girls had cried with her, until now at evening they could cry no more, and a little natural reaction had set in with the excitement of their father's and Sir Ethelred's return.

Their placid faces revolted Bob far more than they ought to have done; they had been unfeignedly distressed and shocked by what had occurred. More shocked than anything else perhaps, for Joyce's conduct in running away had been something almost beyond their comprehension. It had roused them for a time out of their wonted serenity, and had given them a momentary glimpse into the realities of life. They had never conceived of such things really happening, except in books; and it gave them a thrill as they realised that they

themselves were really spectators in an actual tragedy. They had been roused and excited outside their ordinary course. It was not in their natures to cry long under such circumstances; they were too much astonished at all that had been opened out before them to sit and grieve.

Robert, who knew and understood his sisters as little as they did him, was disgusted at their quiet handing about of the tea and bread and butter, as if nothing terrible had occurred. He did not notice their paleness, or the shocked alarmed expression of their eyes; he only saw their self-possession and serenity of face and manner. He was angry with them, and sore and angry with himself, his father, Sir Ethelred—everybody who had had anything to do with his cousin.

The Archdeacon looked up quickly as he came into the room.

"Eh, what!" he said nervously, and then stopped, afraid, it seemed, to frame the question he longed to have answered.

"A lot of people went to London this morning from Moulbury," said Robert sullenly, fixing his eyes with an angry glare in them upon Flo, whom he regarded as the chief author of all the mischief; "but they couldn't tell if she was among them or not."

"I'll go to London at once," said Sir Ethelred, rising. "If there were many people she might not have been noticed!" and the young man's face flushed, and his hand trembled as he put down his cup.

"She certainly did not go from our station," said Bob, "old Jenkins knows us all; and nobody, except people known there, went from Statton, either."

"What makes you think she should go to London?" asked Sir Ethelred.

"Oh, I don't know," said Bob, uneasily shifting from one foot to the other, as he did when embarrassed. "Where else should she go?"

"That is not the question," said his father sharply. "Have you any idea why she should go to London? Speak out, at once."

"No, I don't know," said Bob, more sullenly than before. "I don't know anything about it."

"You are keeping back something," said his father sternly.

"Come, speak up, Bob," said Sir Ethelred, laying his hand on his shoulder. "For God's sake don't keep anything back!"

"I don't know, I don't know!" cried the lad at last. "I don't know where she is. Do you think if I did I wouldn't be after her before now? Do you think I don't care more for her than you dolts of girls do?"

You needn't humbug me ; I know you are *glad* to be rid of her, because she was prettier and nicer than you are ! I won't be quiet, I will speak ! You have driven her away, all of you. She isn't drowned, *that* I am sure of. Joyce wasn't the one to drown herself. I don't and won't believe she is dead !"

"You are not telling us what you know," said Sir Ethelred, tightening his grasp of Bob's shoulder ; and then he whispered a few words in Bob's ear.

"I don't know where she is," Bob repeated sullenly, though his face had crimsoned at Sir Ethelred's whisper. "I only know that she was downstairs in the middle of the night before, and I believe she had a book in her hand, and it might have been a time-table.

"Where did you see her ?" asked his father sternly,

"On the stairs," said Bob nervously, shifting his position a good deal. "I—I was going down—coming up, that is, when I met her. I didn't notice much what she had, and she hid it away, but I believe it was a book."

The Archdeacon rose and strode heavily down to his study. There was not a word spoken during his absence. The girls looked from one to the other, and Sir Ethelred surveyed Bob with a reproachful and indignant expression.

The Archdeacon came back again in a few moments. "The time-table book is not there," he said, in a brighter tone than he had used before for the day; "has anyone examined her room?"

"Yes, everything has been thoroughly searched there," said Blanche, seeing that her mother was crying too much to speak. "I am quite sure it is not there."

"You have turned out all the drawers? everything?" asked her father.

"Yes, everything. The bed, and carpet, and all."

"Then she must have taken it with her, or destroyed it!" cried Sir Ethelred, with hope in his voice as he went towards the door. "I shall go by the next train, and communicate with the London police. We shall soon find her now, never fear. Good-bye," and Sir Ethelred was gone.

Bob followed him immediately and overtook him in the hall as he was getting his hat.

"I say, Ashton, stop a moment; let me——"

"I'll have nothing more to do with you," cried the young man in wrath. "Why didn't you come to me at once and tell me about the book? Afraid of some rascality of your own coming to light, I suppose."

Go off to your Nanny, and let her console you. I'll never have anything to do with you again!" and in great anger Sir Ethelred went away.

Bob stood for a moment looking after him, then snatching up his hat went out too, but not towards Ashton Court.

"It's all up with me now," the lad thought, as he trudged wearily along the road, for he had walked many miles and was tired and footsore. "I never thought of saying anything about the book before I started this morning. The only thing I thought of was getting to Moulbury. They needn't be so awfully down on a fellow for not having all his wits about him in a moment. I am sure nobody wants to find her more than I do, dear little Joyce!" and notwithstanding that Bob had arrived at the dignified state of manhood, in his own estimation at least, some tears forced

themselves into his eyes, and a sob into his throat.

“ I can’t and won’t believe she is in that horrible water !” he cried to himself, as the recollection of the deep silent river came into his mind. “ I can’t believe her dear little face is down in that horrid mud. It’s too dreadful. I don’t believe it. Joyce couldn’t die in that way, she was too full of life ;” and Robert trudged on towards Dowston.

It was quite dusk when he came out on the broad fields on the other side of the churchyard. Instead of taking the path across the meadows that led past the Badcocks’ gate, the one Joyce had gone by, he went across the top of the field, and entered a little straggling coppice that went down to the wood by the stop-gate.

The wood had been silent enough before Bob entered it ; but presently a soft sound

as of wood-pigeons cooing issued from its depths. It was a low sound, but in so still a night a sound that could be heard, though faintly, by anyone listening in Dowston farmhouse.

There was nothing remarkable in the noise of wood-pigeons calling to one another in the wood, except that no wood-pigeons had ever been known to reside there ; but Nanny may have hoped to find some, for no sooner did the low cooing sound break upon her ear than she slipped a little dark shawl about her, and ran out of the house.

She had been in a good position for hearing any sound from the wood, for she was at her window, and that looked towards the trees in question ; and she seemed to possess an accurate ear for sounds, for she made her way without the least hesitation towards a clump of ash-trees among the



low-growing oak saplings, and there the wood-pigeon, with his hands in his pockets, stood moodily leaning against a tree.

He looked so wretched and worn-out and desperate, that Nanny was a little frightened ; also he did not look up as she came towards him, or speak to her when she came close to him. She put her hand on his arm, and the action startled him so much that it was evident he had not been thinking of her.

"Oh ! if you don't want me," she was beginning, rather offended, when she was stopped by Robert seizing her two hands with both his own, and holding them so tightly that she nearly screamed with the pain.

"Don't go on with that sort of rot," he cried in a husky voice, "unless you want to drive me mad. I have had about as much as I can bear for one day. If you

want to turn against me too, just say so straight out, and be off, will you !”

“ Oh, Bob !” the girl cried, pressing closer to him, while a light that was not tears or laughter came into her eyes ; “ you know I never, never could say that. And the fright I was in this morning about you till Alfred told me he had seen you on the Moulbury road ! You have been upset natural-like about that poor young lady, and I am sure I have cried myself sick over it too ; but oh, Bob, don’t go for to be vexed with me !”

There was an honest emotion in Nanny’s face and voice that roused Bob from his morbid fancies. He put his arm about the girl’s waist and kissed her, and she, happy in his presence, clung to him and comforted him in her rough, direct way as best she could. He cut her short when she began to lament the fate of his cousin.

"She isn't drowned any more than you are," he said roughly. "It's a pack of nonsense got up by those old maids Sacketts. I'll never believe Joyce drowned herself."

"But, Bob, the stop-gate was open. What if she tried to cross it to get to Moulbury, as you fancy! It's the shortest way, you know, across those marshes."

Bob's face grew very white.

"She might have tried," he said hoarsely; "but then, if Joyce tried she would have done it."

"It ter'ble difficult," said Nanny, with a shiver; "and the current so strong beneath, it might like turn her head."

"Don't!" cried Bob; "don't say another word, Nanny—I won't believe it!"

There was silence for a few minutes, which was spent by Nanny in kissing Bob's hand, the arm of which was about her

shoulders. He looked at her for a moment, then said :

"You seem more taken up with my hand than you do about *her*."

"Yes, o' course," replied Nanny promptly. "It makes me think what I should feel if —if any such tale were going about you, Bob."

He pressed her a little closer.

"You are not going to give me up, too, then?" he asked.

"Give you up! Oh, Bob, you don't want to be rid o' me?"

"Not I," said Bob, in answer to the girl's terrified exclamation and look ; "but maybe you'll sing another tune when you hear what I have got to say."

"Tell me, what is it, Bob? I believe you are making game of me."

"Oh, very likely," said Bob coolly ; "and, let me tell you, it's my belief that's what

everybody will tell me I ought to have done. You needn't get in a wax, for I am not going to. Just hear what I have got to say. It will be all up at home now. The governor will never rest till he has found out about what I was doing when I saw Joyce ; and Ashton knows all about my coming here, and he is in such a rage with me, he won't care if he lets it out or not. Besides, I believe that old cat Johnstone smells something. So you see, Nan, it will all be out soon, and then what are we to do ?"

Nanny's only answer was to begin to cry and to sob out something about "father," and "he would be so angry."

"Oh, do dry up !" said Bob, in some disgust. "That's what you women always do, inundate everything with water. Of course your father will be angry ; that's what I am coming to. Perhaps we ought

to have thought of all this before ; but I am dashed if I ever looked beyond our next meeting !”

“ No more didn’t I, I’m sure,” said Nanny, half laughing and half sobbing at her lover’s puzzled visage.

Bob comforted her with a kiss.

“ It’s been very good fun, hasn’t it ?” he asked, a little wistfully. “ Now, Nan, it’s all in your own hands whether this is to be the end of it, or whether it’s to go on for—for always,” the lad added nervously.

Nanny looked at him in surprise.

“ I don’t know if I rightly take in your meanin’,” she said.

“ Oh, bother ! Well, look here, Nan. Do you care enough about me to stick to me always ?” and he took her hands again in his.

Nanny lifted her honest face. It was too dim to see much of the red that flushed

over it ; but she said, quite simply : “ Yes, I do, Bob.”

“ Enough to face everybody’s being angry and abusing you ?”

“ Father wouldn’t do that,” she said quickly. “ Oh, Bob, why should father be angry ?”

“ Because,” said Bob, speaking firmly enough by this time, “ there’ll be such a precious shindy up at the Rectory about it all, that you and I must be out of it. We must run away, Nanny, and your father won’t like that.”

“ Oh, but Bob, couldn’t we let him know ? We might tell *him* !”

“ And you would be locked up, and I kicked out, and he would march straight off to my father with the whole story. That’s how that move would tell, Nan.”

Nanny could but acknowledge the probable accuracy of Bob’s prophecy.

"But it goes sore against me to keep a secret from him," she began to say, when Bob cut her short with :

"That's bosh, Nanny ! Isn't our being here now a secret from him ?"

"Oh yes ; but this isn't getting married," said Nanny, opening her eyes very wide.

"No," said Bob, with a little nervous laugh ; "but say, Nan, isn't that what it ought to come to ?"

"I should never care for anybody else," replied Nanny evasively.

"Then we had better get married," said Bob coolly ; then after a little pause he broke out into, "I tell you what it is, Nan, everything about me depends upon you. I am going to rack and ruin as fast as ever I can here. You know I was drunk last week, though they don't know it at home, and you can see plainly enough that I shall go on getting drunk, if

I have nothing to do, nothing to hope for, nothing to keep me out of mischief. What prospects have I got as a gentleman? I have no education, no fortune, no anything? I shall never be fit to hold a decent situation if one was ever offered me. Why, I can't even write a letter properly. All I am fit for is to see about horses, and breed cattle, and that sort of thing, and that my father wouldn't let me do."

"Gentlemen do go as farmers. There's young Mr. Watson at Stood's," broke in Nanny.

"Yes, whose father pays a hundred a year for him to learn the business. Likely my father is going to do that for me! There's only one thing to be done for me, Nan, and that is to emigrate. The governor might stump up something to get me out of the country altogether, especially if we were married, Nan. He

would want to get rid of us precious sharp, then."

"Let me think about it a bit," she said, seating herself on the leafy ground. "I am getting more clear in my mind now. You flustered me a bit at first, Bob."

"That's right. You are a cool hand, you know," said Bob admiringly. "Now say, Nan, isn't it the very best thing I could do?"

"Where do you mean to go?" asked Nanny.

"America," said Bob promptly; "they raise no end of horses there. I should soon get on like anything. Ashton says I know more about a horse than any fellow he ever came across. He did really. And I'd begin as a groom, or anything. I wouldn't mind work a bit. Perhaps we might get rich—eh, Nan?"

"That's as may be," she replied, ap-

parently unintoxicated with visions of coming affluence. "Have you said anything to anybody about it?"

"Not to a soul; but I have been getting things out of Joyce, and newspapers, and so on. I know lots about it, and it will be a fine start. Joyce told me all sorts of things about the way people make money out in San Francisco. Why, common labourers get eight or ten shillings a day—think of that!—only they drink and waste it all directly."

"Then a lot of good it will do to you to go there," remarked Nanny, rather ironically.

"That's just it, Nan," cried the lad eagerly; "if you won't come with me I won't go. By George, I won't! I'll stay here and booze my life away, and perhaps end by going to gaol. I won't go—it wouldn't be any use—if you don't come

too. You can keep me straight—you know you can, Nan. You are the only one in the world that cares for me in spite of everything against me. I thought Joyce would, but she didn't. If I have you with me I shall have something to work for, and save for and be proud of. I shall, Nan. I am proud of you now for sticking to me like you have. You never rowed me even for getting drunk ; you only cried. I never will again, Nan, never, if you will stick to me. I am asking you to give up a lot, I know ; but you shall never repent it. You will be the salvation of me, you will really. Without you I shall go to the dogs, because I shall have nothing to live for. Oh, Nan, if you will only give me the chance, you shall be proud of me yet. I am not the useless hulk everybody thinks me here. You shall be proud of me yet if you'll come."

“Oh, Bob, I am dearly, dearly proud of you now,” the girl cried through her tears ; “to think of you, a gentleman, wanting the likes of me !”

“I say, cut that !” cried Bob, in a tone so savage that he startled her. “None of that sort of gammon between you and me. We go as equals, or we don’t go at all. Except,” the lad added, as he caught her in his arms, “you are lots better than I am, Nan.”

“No, no,” she cried, her face all aglow with delight and love ; “I’ll go to the very world’s end with you, Bob, and there isn’t nobody in all the world like you.”





CHAPTER IV.

AND what had become of Joyce? While the hue-and-cry was going after her all over the country about Charrington, and her friends and relations were plunged in deepest grief for her, that wilful little person had been plodding wearily up and down the dusty streets of London. It was not until she actually found herself in the great roaring city that the absence of any fixed plan or definite mode of action occurred to her. Her one thought had been to get away from Charrington and the people who thought ill of her father; she would not be

beholden to them, relations though they were, for food or shelter while they believed him capable of the villany she had heard ascribed to him. Yet when she found herself alone in London, in the midst of its wilderness of houses and its rushing torrents of people, her heart had failed her dismally. What was she to do? where was she to go? all day long she had been asking herself these questions, and finding no answer to them.

At last, towards evening, she found herself near the cool shades of Kensington Gardens. The leafy quietness attracted her and drew her in; she was so tired and footsore that she was glad to rest under one of the trees—they were the most friendly things she had met in all the stony city, for they reminded her of that far-off forest-life now so dim and beautiful in the past. Like many emotional people, Joyce

remembered things that had taken place but a short time ago very vaguely. She forgot all the unpleasantnesses and struggles of her early life, and remembered only the freedom and happiness of it. From the recollection of the confined round of narrow duties belonging to Charrington she turned with a fierce loathing, and it seemed to her that her heart almost broke with longing for the old life she never could live again.

In her weariness and weakness, for she had eaten little for the day and had walked very many miles since sunrise, she was perhaps incapable of forming any very definite plans for the future, now so dark before her ; she wanted rest and quiet first, and these she found under the darkening trees in the beautiful old palace gardens. So she leant back against the tree-trunk and looked with dreamy eyes towards the

burning west, and noted the smoke of the thousand houses lift itself between her and the distant sky, and veil its splendour, and recalled that last yellow glory of gold and red on which her father's dying eyes had rested.

Had she done right? he had told her to go and live among his people and be as one of them, and she had left them. A great sob came into her throat as the first doubt of the rightness of her conduct came into her heart. But she kept it down. Was not his honour dearer to her than anything else, and would not her very presence under the roof of his slanderers be a tacit acknowledgment that she believed the accusation to be true? She must have done right to come away. He could never wish her to live among those who believed him guilty—he who was so good himself could never have believed that

his own brother held such thoughts of him in his heart.

“I will go away, right away,” thought Joyce, as she wiped from her eyes the tears that would come despite all her efforts to keep them back; “go away as he went away from this slanderous wicked England, and never, never come back to it any more. What was right for him was right for me; he went away, and I will go away;” and having thus soothed her conscience Joyce suffered her weariness to overcome her, and fell fast asleep among the roots of the old tree.

When she woke up it was clear cold starlight, and a little breeze was whispering among the leaves. She fancied for a moment that she was back in her old forest-life again, but a glance round at the distant gas lamps showed her where she was. Dazed and a little frightened, she rose and

took up her bundle, and went down a long path she saw glimmering under the trees. It led to an iron gate, fast locked and bolted. She tried another path with the same result. She met no one in the gardens, and the streets without were comparatively quiet.

It was clear that it was very late, and that she was locked in and must make the best of it. To a girl of her bringing up, a night in the open air was not a very serious matter, and had it not been for the fear of robbers or murderers in so great a city, Joyce would have passed the remainder of the night peaceably enough.

She was awakened in the morning by a light pattering on the leaves over her head ; it had begun to rain, and the general aspect of the gardens was dull and miserable. It was dreary work sitting in the damp waiting for the gate to be opened, and she

dared not stir from her hiding-place until she saw several people walking about, for fear of its being discovered where she had passed the night, and of possible punishment for her trespass. But she got out at last, and made her way to a confectioner's and had some breakfast ; and then, purchasing a map, she studied it long and anxiously.

During her long waiting under the trees that morning, she had gone over her capabilities to herself somewhat in this manner :

" I can't play the piano, or draw, or teach the use of the globes (whatever that is), or do much arithmetic, or know the dates of the Kings of England, so it's no use thinking of being a governess. What else do ladies do in England ? Didn't I hear Walter say something about their being clerks in telegraph-offices, and keep

ing accounts. I couldn't do either of those, I guess. I see I mustn't expect to do ladies' work. I can cook—that is, camping-fashion. Expect I shouldn't get along in an English kitchen; why I don't know what half the things in it are for! I suppose I could be a nurse. Anybody can take care of children, or most mothers seem to think so, which is the same thing; but I calculate I am not patient enough, and I never held a baby in my life. I can make beds and scrub, but I don't care about that sort of thing either; I shouldn't like living with the other servants. No, I guess a nurse's is the best place after all; for I love children, and there might not be a baby, and I could sit in the nursery. It's mighty difficult to map out a career for yourself when you haven't been brought up to any!"

So after Joyce had finished her breakfast

she set out to discover a registry-office, and having found one, went in and stated her wants.

She was rather disconcerted at having her name taken and being asked for an address. She had determined beforehand on the name she would choose—Mary Dillon, a name well-known enough in her mother's native country; but she had prepared no answer for her address. She stumbled forth something about having no fixed residence at present, and she would call there at any time.

The woman who kept the place looked at her rather suspiciously, and after scanning her face and figure, remarked :

“You have never been in a place before?”

“No,” said Joyce, blushing.

“I thought not. Can you read and write, and 'ad a little general education?”

"Of course," said Joyce, mightily offended ; "and I can speak French."

"Oh, speak French, can you !" interrupted the woman ; "well, then, if you take my advice you will go as a nursery-governess, not as a common nurse."

"What should I have to do ?" asked Joyce.

"Teach young children, and probably wash and dress them, and not be above 'elping in odd jobs ; but you wouldn't have the nursery to clean, or be expected to mix with the other servants."

"I should like that, please," said Joyce, her face brightening ; "can you tell me of any place ?"

"I had better enter your name," said the woman ; "the fee is five shillings."

Joyce's face fell at this. She had not so very many shillings left in her little purse ; but there seemed no choice, so she paid the

five shillings, and was told to call again in the middle of the day ; and not until she got outside and read the paper in the window did she discover that the fee for all *servants* was one shilling only. However, it was too late to go back now, and such a situation would be much better for her than that of an ordinary nurse.

She spent some dismal hours wandering about the wet streets until midday, when she again presented herself at the office.

"Oh, you can't expect to get a place yet!" said the woman in charge rather snappishly, as she entered ; "there's only one lady down on the books for a nursery-governess, and she doesn't want her for a fortnight."

"You ought to have told me that this morning," said Joyce indignantly.

"No tempers 'ere, young woman," returned the other tartly ; "anything of that

sort, and I scratch your name off the books at once. You must wait your turn. There are fifteen other young persons, just as good as you, I'll be bound, down before you."

"You have taken me in; you have swindled me!" cried Joyce, the hot tears welling up into her eyes, and she stamped her foot in her indignation and despair.

The woman's only answer was to open a half glass-door at the back of the little fancy-shop where she sat, and to call some one by name.

A big slouching man of a very untidy and loose aspect came lazily forward with a pipe in his mouth.

"What's the row?" he muttered.

"Oh! this 'ere young woman is getting into tantrums because I 'asn't found her a place since eleven o'clock this morning. Did I engage to get you a place this

morning, miss?" she added in a quieter tone, with mock civility.

"No, you didn't; but——" said Joyce, trembling and furious.

"There, you 'ear her, Willum! And you stand there and 'ear your own true wife insulted and cheeked to her face by them no better than they should be! And you a-calling of yourself a man to stand there and 'ear it!" shrieked Willum's wife, each sentence growing louder and more hysterical than the last.

Joyce was frightened, and still more so when the surly man came heavily forward, and touching her on the shoulder said:

"Yer had best get out of this, young woman; and mind I don't catch yer here agin, upsetting the missus like this." For the ill-used woman had burst into a flood of tears.

“But my money,” gasped poor Joyce—
“my five shillings! Oh, only give me that,
or even part of it, and I’ll never——”

“A likely story, indeed,” shrieked the wife, “when I’ve had her name down, and goodness only knows the trouble I have been at about it the blessed morning! Her money indeed!”

“Come now, yer’d best get out,” said the man, touching Joyce again.

“Or I’ll know the reason why; a brazen-faced hussy a-insulting a honest woman in her own house—the good-for-nothing!”

But Joyce waited to hear no more. Trembling and frightened she rushed out into the wet street, and her dread of the savage sullen man was such that she ran for some five minutes as fast as she could without waiting to see where she was going.

It had come on to rain again, a steady persistent downpour. She clearly could

not remain out in the streets all the rest of the day and night. She was afraid to try any more registry-offices, and was rather at her wits' end what to do. Passing a news-shop she went in and bought a penny paper, thinking she might see something in an advertisement that would suit her. One lady did want a nursery-governess, but it was in Bloomsbury, a long way from where she was ; but she determined to try, so she set off to walk through the pouring rain to Guildford Square. By the help of her map she found it, and going to the house named in the advertisement, timidly knocked.

She was shown into a small room on the ground-floor, with obvious contempt, by the footman who opened the door. She was left there a long time by herself. The house was very still, and the only view from the windows was over a strip of blackened parched grass towards the back premises of

a row of tall houses, so close that they almost hid the sky. She was getting quite tired of her dingy surroundings when the door opened, and a tall, rather stout lady, considerably overdressed, came in.

She looked at Joyce's slight figure and pretty face with a very unmistakable air of disapproval, which did not tend to set the girl at her ease.

"I called," she said rather feebly, for the lady's manner was anything but encouraging, "in consequence of an advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph* of to-day."

"Indeed!" said the lady coldly.

"Yes," said Joyce, feeling as if she had taken a plunge into a very icy bath indeed; "I should like to take the situation."

"I have no doubt of it," said the lady again; and the contemptuousness of this remark crushed Joyce into silence.

'What can you do?' asked the majestic

matron after a pause, seeing that Joyce remained silent.

“I can talk French, and know a little Latin, and—and ordinary things like history and geography. I am best at geography,” said Joyce, brightening a little, to be instantly crushed by the lady’s remark :

“You have excellent references, of course ?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Joyce hesitatingly. “You see, I have never been out before, and—and I am only just up from the country to-day.”

The lady instantly stepped to the bell, and, in a majestic and offended manner, rang it violently.

“I am surprised at your audacity in coming here !” she said, as Joyce rose, bewildered. “James, show this young person out !” and without another word the injured

female swept past Joyce into the hall and up a very gorgeous flight of stairs.

James, with a very perceptible grin on his face, stood by while his mistress ascended in her wrath.

“ I suppose yer ain’t too proud to hopen the door for yerself, Miss Nussery,” he remarked in an offensively jeering tone to puzzled Joyce, in the hall ; “ ’cause I fancy if yer har, yer won’t get hout afore the missus comes down again ; and won’t yer catch it if she sees yer here again ! Well I never ! there’s himperence for yer ! ” he added, as Joyce, taking in the situation, walked haughtily past him, and throwing the door wide open, stalked down the steps without offering to shut it.

“ That young woman ain’t up to no good,” was the injured footman’s soliloquy, as he stood on the steps and watched the indignant little creature down the square.

It was childish and undignified, but Joyce burst into tears as she went on. They were bitter tears, and angry as well as bitter. It was her first experience of her descent in the social scale.

“ I’ll never, never live in England, where *everybody* is so horrid !” she sobbed to herself. “ Oh, if I were only out again in those dear, dear forests and mountains ! I never was so insulted in my life—never ! If only I can get money, I’ll go there again, and never, never come back to this horrid, bad, wicked country ! I’ll do anything—sweep the streets—to go there again !”

Few people can have a comfortable cry in the streets of London, and Joyce was not one of those favoured few, her crying being of too tempestuous a nature to pass unobserved by the London populace. So she quickly dried her tears, seeing some small and prematurely aged children re-



garding her with curiosity; and drawing out her paper she glanced over the advertisements again.

The only one there that would suit her at all was one regarding the Soho Bazaar, wherein she read that there were waiting-rooms there for servants and governesses, who could be hired on the spot.

The place closed at four, and it was nearly that time now. Finding from her map that she was not far from it, she walked there quickly, and arrived just in time to have her name entered on the books, and to be told to be there at ten the next morning. There was no fee to be paid until she was provided with a situation, and as this seemed to promise some sort of security, she departed, feeling lighter-hearted than she had been before for the day. •

She got some food at a restaurant close

by, and anxiously debated in her mind how to get a cheap and respectable lodging for the night. She went out and wandered about again, seeking in vain for any house that looked cheap enough, and at the same time clean enough, to enter. At last she thought of applying to a policeman, and passing several young and rather purposeless-looking ones, saw an elderly and very respectable man in policeman's dress standing on a curb-stone. He was respectful and obliging, and told her of a decent house not very far off, where she could have a room and be in no danger of being molested ; and thanking him heartily, she turned her weary steps in the direction he pointed out.

The next day, being refreshed by a good night's sleep and a long rest, Joyce appeared at the Soho Bazaar. Although it was only just ten, she found several people, evidently in want of situations, waiting about the

rooms. She was shown into a sort of wide passage where the governesses sat, that led to another and larger room for the mistresses who were in want of servants.

Joyce took her seat, and surveyed with great interest and curiosity her neighbours. They were all older than herself, mostly rather faded-looking, and all shabbily dressed. There was an anxious look about their eyes, and a worn, haggard expression on some of the faces that went to Joyce's heart. Her next neighbour attracted her attention more than any of the others. She was a little thin, pale woman, with limp wisps of yellow hair on each side of her face, and a perpetual watery appearance about the eyes. She had a sharp, rather red nose, and sighed so very deeply that Joyce could not refrain from asking her if she was in pain. Such an exceedingly sharp "no" was

snapped at her that she felt quite disconcerted; and then her neighbour on the other side, a stout good-humoured German with a plain face, nudged her with her elbow, and whispered :

“ It is her misfortune dat she sit here day after day, mein Kind ; and now you haf come she haf less chance dan before.”

“ Why ?” asked Joyce.

The merry-faced German laughed.

“ Why, you are one more ; and dere is already too much of us for de ladies dat wants us.”

“ Have you been here often ?” asked Joyce, with a sinking at her heart.

“ Oh no, one, two, tree time ; I haf no difficulty at all. Englesh ladies like my countrywomen fery much. You, do you speak Cherman ?”

“ No, only French,” said Joyce, more depressed than ever.

"Ah, well, dat is not of much use if you are English; de English nefers speak French well. But you haf goot references?"

"No, I haven't any; I have never been out before," said Joyce, her cheeks burning.

The thin woman on her other side heard her.

"What, you haven't any references?" she asked, in an evidently gratified tone.

"I have never been out before," said Joyce, more feebly than ever. "I have just come from the country."

"Then you haven't a chance. My references are excellent—excellent," said the red-nosed woman with vehemence, turning her long shoulder towards Joyce.

"Nefer you mind her," whispered her German friend in Joyce's ear. "It is hart to be in want, and she has been here so fery, fery often."

"Poor thing!" said Joyce sympathisingly,

wondering how long it would be before the same tale should be told of her. Further conversation was stopped by the entrance of some ladies, who looked about them in a careful, anxious manner, and ended by taking a chair apiece and holding a low-toned conversation with the governess they wished to interrogate.

Two hours passed ; two or three times during their course a thin, active woman dressed in old alpaca, skimpingly made, and wearing a peculiar blandness of expression, came up to Joyce and asked her a few questions, such as length of time in her last situation, terms, etc., from a paper in her hand. She was evidently attending to the instructions of some ladies who had written to her about their wants. Joyce not complying with their desires, the thin nervous woman passed her by, and went on to others. Several ladies came in, and



looked about and asked questions, but no one seemed to take a fancy to her.

There was a great deal more noise and bustle in the inner rooms, where nurses, and cooks, and housemaids were being engaged, or rather were engaging mistresses, as rapidly as they appeared ; indeed there seemed three ladies to every servant.

Joyce's heart sank very low within her as two o'clock approached, and still no one had even talked of engaging her ; her German companion had long been disposed of, and before she went she whispered to Joyce to be of good cheer and not to ask too little wages.

"How much do you think I ought to ask ?" Joyce said.

"Oh, mein Kind, de more you ask de more value will you be ; ask twenty-five pounds. It is a great sum, but, mein Gott, you can take less if dey will not pay it."

Five-and-twenty pounds a year! Was this considered a large sum for a nursery-governess? How badly people were paid in England! Joyce had considered that fifty pounds per annum was a moderate sum to ask. She remembered what servants and labourers received in San Francisco, and another stone was cast upon the cairn of indignation she was raising over England in her mind. It would take her three months to get money enough to go to America, even by a steerage passage; she had fancied that a few weeks' labour would be sufficient. She determined more than ever to get to that favoured continent as soon as possible.

While she was deep in her calculations of expenses that must be incurred in her passage and journey, she was startled by a voice addressing her, and looking up she saw a gentleman standing before her.

She blushed and stammered something, and then he said :

“ I am, ah, looking out, ah, for a—that is, for my wife of course—a governess, a nursery governess.”

“ That is what I want to be,” said Joyce, as demurely as she could ; but the thought of getting a situation made her eyes dance, and wreathed her dimpled face with smiles in a most ungoverness-like fashion.

“ You will do,” said the gentleman in an equally unbusiness-like manner ; “ can you come at once ?”

“ Oh, but what am I to do ?” cried Joyce, not altogether liking his fixed stare at her. “ What are my duties, if you please ?”

The gentleman started and looked at a written paper in his hand.

“ There are three children,” he began.

“ Not a baby ?” asked Joyce.

"No, not now," he answered; "the youngest is three, the others four and eight. Confound women, why don't they write plainer? I beg your pardon. Let me see, you will have to wash and dress them, teach them their letters, and so on. Oh, by the way, I was to have got a German or a Frenchwoman. You are English, are you not?"

"Oh, but I can speak French quite well," cried Joyce, in such evident alarm that he smiled, and said:

"Oh, that will do; I hate foreigners. Well, I think that's all. The under-housemaid will wait on you—clean things, I suppose. Will it suit you?"

"That's so!" replied Joyce decisively; then, looking up under her long black lashes with demure fun in her clear eyes, she added: "But I must have five-and-twenty pounds a year."

“The deuce!” said the gentleman, looking at his paper again—“my wife says twenty; but I dare say it will be all right. Very well, then, can you come at once?”

“Oh, certainly,” said Joyce, getting up. “You have engaged me, haven’t you?”

“Yes—why?”

“Because,” said Joyce, breaking out into a little ripple of laughter, “you haven’t said a word about my references.”

The gentleman paused and looked at her in some anxiety for a moment; but her laughter was infectious, and he said as he walked beside her to another room where fees were paid:

“That’s the very point my wife told me to be most particular about; but I suppose you have them all right, haven’t you?”

“Not one,” said Joyce. “I have never been in a situation before, and I don’t know

a soul in London, and I have not long come from America, and I am an orphan."

"Oh, you needn't explain to *me*," said the gentleman hastily, touched by the sudden saddening of the grey eyes beside him. "I think references are utter bosh. I knew, of course, from the moment I saw you among those old frumps that you were not of the regular governess class. The only question is, what shall we say to my wife? You wouldn't mind," with a hesitating manner, "telling me what your father was?"

"An officer in the English army," answered Joyce promptly.

"Dear me, why so am I! I am home on leave from India."

"I can't tell you any more," said Joyce, feeling disposed to confide in him from the fact of his belonging to her father's profession; "the fact is, I don't want to be

dependent upon relations, and that's how I have no references."

"I have it," her companion said; "I will say that you are the daughter of an old comrade."

"You can say so if you like, of course," replied Joyce with a certain decision in her tones; "but *I* shall not say so, and I guess you had better be off this bargain, or tell your wife the truth."

He looked rather abashed at this direct speech, but took out his card-case and gave her his card.

"That is my name," he said, "and I hope you will not think that I wish to be off my bargain. On the contrary, I shall be very glad if you will accept my situation. I have no doubt my wife will like you."

"Thank you," said Joyce heartily; "I consider you are very kind. When shall I come?"

“Will this evening suit you? I am afraid it is giving you very short notice; but my wife is delicate, and we had to send our last governess off in a hurry. We shall be much obliged if you can manage to come so soon.”

“That will suit me very well,” said Joyce; and she went with a light heart to pay her fee.

She had sense enough to perceive that it would not do to go to her new situation with only a small bundle for luggage. She had only thirty shillings left of her money, but she invested most of it in a cheap second-hand portmanteau and a plain ready-made dress. Getting a boy to carry the former for her, with her bundle and dress packed in it, she made her appearance in Loftus Square the same evening at six o'clock.





CHAPTER V.

THE news of Joyce's disappearance from Charrington did not travel to Shere Court until the day after she had left; when it did get there it was borne by Mrs. Johnstone. That good lady had indeed been indefatigable in spreading the news; and it was only after she had thoroughly exhausted the parishes of Charrington and Ashton that she bethought herself of Shere Court and the old rector of Marshsted. She went to Shere Court first, for she was not without some lingering hope that the tale she had to deliver would

be a particularly unpleasant one to the owner of that watery domain.

She was not disappointed at the effect her news produced. Austin was walking about his fields when she came by, trying to make himself believe that the proverb respecting the best manure and the farmer's foot was worthy of consideration. He was not a bad farmer. He got as much, or very nearly as much, out of the land as his mother's old-fashioned prejudices would let him. Secretly he longed to follow his renowned neighbour, Thomas Broadwood, in his new style of high farming, and over and over again had endeavoured to impress upon his mother the virtues of a new chemical manure, or some scientific improvement. But the old lady would not hear of them, and having no more particular interest in the farm than in anything else, he had let matters drift on in



their steady old-fashioned way; and if sometimes he wished that there were rows of strawberries and beans between his hop lines, and finer clusters hanging from the poles, he soon checked his aspirations with the wholesome reflection that if he had more money he did not care about spending it, and so it did not matter.

On this particular morning he was, as before said, walking about his fields; but he was without the country gentleman's trusty companion and universal investigator, the humble spud. Austin preferred to keep his hands in his pockets, or to pull his moustache, or even gather wild-flowers, for which he had a particular pensive fancy, to encumbering himself with so useless an implement. So he strolled on from one little group of men to another, enjoying the hot sunshine and the blue vault above him, and the sight of the

ripe corn and the shimmering landscape. Enjoying them, so he told himself; but those brown eyes of his were blank and cold, and such deep lines had never before appeared about his mouth and forehead. He was very pale too, pale beneath his ordinary sallowness of tint, pale with the sort of pallor that comes from sleepless nights and weary days. He was walking along the great corn-field where he had so often watched the arch of changing sky overhead, but his head was downcast and his hand about his moustache, when he heard his name called from behind him.

He turned and saw little Mrs. Johnstone, shiny, black, and metallic; jet trimmings and raven hair all sparkling in the sunlight, and glittering like a steel knife. The lady's little sharp eyes were not less brilliant than the rest of her; they stabbed him like a knife as she peered into his face while he

shook hands with her, and in that moment he knew she had some bad news for him.

"You have heard the news, of course?" she said, knowing perfectly well that he had done nothing of the kind.

"No," he said, with a sidelong glance of imperfectly suppressed dislike; "I do not care for gossip."

"Oh, quite so! I know there are plenty of people who hold themselves quite above such trifling things as the well-being of their friends. Though why I should say friends, I don't know either; neither you nor yours have ever received much civility at their hands, that I must say!"

"I really am unable to guess what you mean," he answered politely, though that sensitive lip of his would tremble with a drear foreboding that he knew was not mistaken.

She saw it of course, as she saw every-

thing her neighbours wished her not to see, so she tortured him a little longer.

“Well, well, it never can be said of *me* that I didn’t see through it all from the very beginning; and if certain parties would have listened to me they might have been spared a good deal. As if anybody with sense could ever expect one of *that* branch of the family to come to any good!”

“You still leave me at a loss,” Austin remarked quietly, as she paused.

“I don’t speak of *losses*,” said his brisk little tormentor; “for my part I call it a gain to the whole neighbourhood. You never can tell what underhand tricks people of that sort are not up to. We *know* she has made fools of three of you, and how many others we don’t know of—goodness gracious only does!”

“I am not conscious of any sensation of that sort, more than usual,” said Austin.



“Good gracious, of course not! If men always knew when they were being made fools of, the world would be a very different place to what it is.”

“I agree with you. The women would have a hard time of it.”

“You needn’t affect not to know what I am talking about,” snapped Mrs. Johnstone. “I say there are three of you—Walter, and Ethelred Ashton, and you—and you know it, and now she has the laugh on her side pretty well. Some fellow she picked up on board ship no doubt. It was a pre-arranged thing, as clear as possible. Don’t tell me about drowning. That’s all humbug!”

The nervous white fingers played about the moustache in a way that was highly gratifying to Mrs. Johnstone’s feelings. She waited for him to ask some question, but as he did not do so, she was forced to proceed without this additional pleasure :

"If Ethelred or that dressed-up doll of a mother of his had ever taken my advice, he would never be in the pretty position he is now. Did you know he has gone to London?"

"No; what for?"

"Why, after her of course. You don't mean to tell me you have not heard that Joyce Hyde ran away from her uncle's house yesterday morning, and after spreading some cock-and-bull story that she was going to drown herself, went off to London, as her own cousin says. Though why he should know is more than I can tell."

She had said it now, and she looked with keen delight into the brown melancholy eyes above her. She saw one quick flash pass across them, and that was all, for he turned his face aside and walked on beside her without speaking.

She was rather disappointed that he did

not express his feelings more, so she went on :

“Of course it was plain enough to me, and to anybody with sense, that the game she was playing with you at the garden-party was only to lead that poor boy on. I don't believe, for my part, that he ever did actually propose to her, though he must have come very near it. If he had, she would have accepted him fast enough. Indeed, my belief is now that she has got up all this sensation on purpose to bring him to the point. Unless, of course, she had got hold of somebody better off on the voyage home. You meet all sorts of people in those big steamers, and she may be off to join him. It must be one or other of the two.”

“Where is the Archdeacon ?” Austin asked in a tone that showed he had not heard a single word of her last tirade.

“How should I know ?” she said snap-

pishly, for she was angry at not having roused him more. "They were dragging the river all day yesterday. She may be washed up outside your orchard for all I can tell now."

To her astonishment and vexation he simply lifted his hat, and turned away from her, striding across the great wheat-field over rows of mown corn, and in a straight line for Charrington Rectory.

There was clearly nothing more to be got out of him; but Mrs. Leybourne was still left, so Mrs. Johnstone made her way into the old house.

Meanwhile Austin went on towards the Rectory. He did not notice that he was going across country instead of by the more winding road. He neither knew nor saw anything on his journey, but straight as an arrow he went on, getting over hedges and leaping dykes as they came in his way, i

complete unconsciousness of their existence. He scarcely knew what he thought or believed of the confused tirade into which Mrs. Johnstone had launched out. He only believed that some great misfortune had happened to him, and that in some mysterious way Joyce was mixed up in it.

In an almost incredibly short time he was in Charrington Rectory, asking the Archdeacon in his study what it all was.

A few words put him in possession of all the facts the Archdeacon held, and Leybourne stood leaning on the study-table, listening to every syllable with such a stricken face of dumb heartbreak, that at the conclusion of his tale the Archdeacon could not forbear remarking :

“From your appearance I can scarcely hope that you have any clue to—to my niece’s motives.”

“None—none whatever ; would God I

had!" was the reply, delivered in such a tone of anguish that the Archdeacon, startled by his manner, rose, and laid his hand on the younger man's arm.

"You are surprised to see me here," said Austin, answering the touch. "I should have come before if there had been any hope for me. I love her as no man ever loved a woman, or heaven, yet!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" said the Archdeacon in great astonishment. "Why, Leybourne, I never dreamt of this. Dear, dear—and poor Ashton too!"

"You would never have heard of it but for this," said Austin, sadly enough. "I love her too well to ever try and tie her down to my wreck of a life. I loved her from the first moment I saw her; but she should never have known it. I only tell you now that you may see that I have in a way some sort of claim to be allowed to



search for her. You cannot—don't believe that—that awful story——”

“About the river?” said the Archdeacon, shuddering as the other stopped, unable to go on. “I thank God, no; not now. The loss of my time-table book has restored us all to hope.”

“But where can she have gone? What motive can she have had for leaving? Great God! I thought she was to be happily married!” and Austin sank his head upon his hands.

The Archdeacon hesitated a moment, then drew a letter from his pocket.

“In consideration of the confidence you have made me, I feel that I ought to show you this,” he said, placing Joyce's letter in Austin's hands. “Believe me, it is not to cause you pain by referring to an old sorrow, but it affords the only clue we have as to her motives.”

Austin read it through, and his face flashed.

"She should never have known it!" he cried. "Who could have been base and cruel enough to repeat that slander to her? It was never true. My mother told me of it only the other day, and, like your niece, I disbelieve it utterly. I respect and love her more than ever for resenting such a thing. She cannot be dead. She is too noble and pure to commit a great act and sully it in the doing."

"You don't mean," cried the Arch-deacon, aghast, "that you actually approve of her running away!"

"I approve of the feelings that prompted her to do it—not of the way she carried them out. Poor child! Isn't it just what he did? and she is so like him. Poor Julius! poor child!"

"Poor child indeed!" sighed her uncle.

“The question is, Leybourne, can she be found? Ashton went to town last night; and Walter, who came back last night, went up this morning.”

Some more conversation followed, and Austin stated his suddenly formed intention of proceeding to London without delay, and remaining there for some time, ostensibly with regard to his scientific pursuits, but really to search for the missing girl.

“You will be kind enough to say nothing of my looking for her,” he said at parting. “She might not like it to be talked about, for of course it is her cousin’s and Sir Ethelred’s place to do so; but I shall look all the same, and you must keep up the fiction about my astronomical studies;” and with almost a bright air Austin left Charington Rectory.

He did not look like a man who had just heard very bad news when he got out into

the open fields and went back to Sher^e Court. Indeed, several years of age and care seemed to have been lifted off his shoulders. His eyes were bright, and his step elastic. He quite startled Mrs. Johnstone, whom he met coming out after her long gossip with his mother.

"Well, I am sure you look as pleased as Punch," said that lady severely. "One would think you had heard good news instead of bad; but you men have no feeling."

"I have heard good news," he said, pausing a moment at the door. "I am off to the Greenwich Observatory this evening. Look out in the papers for news of my great discoveries, Mrs. Johnstone!" and with a smile and a nod he passed on to his room.

"Well I never!" said that much-disgusted lady, as she left the house. "Of all

the heartless wretches ! And I really did think he cared for that girl. But what does he think of her compared to his rubbishy astronomy ?” And Mrs. Johnstone felt very much ill-used.

“She doesn’t love him ! She wouldn’t marry him ! She doesn’t love him, or any-one yet !” was the glad thought in Austin’s breast, as he hurriedly packed a few clothes in a portmanteau. “She has gone away from them all, for they never understood her or loved her as I do, and I shall find her.”





CHAPTER VI.

AS Joyce entered the hall of No. 12, Loftus Square, two people—the gentleman she had seen in the morning, and a lady—were crossing from the stairs to go into the dining-room.

“Oh dear, what a draught!” exclaimed the lady pettishly, as the footman shut the hall-door.

She was a thin, fragile-looking person, with light hair, light eyes, and a faded complexion. She had small regular features, and the general air of one who has at some former period been a beauty, and is fretful at having lost that distinction. She might

have been good-looking now, if it had not been for the pinched, peevish expression of her face—partly the result of ill-health, partly of ill-temper.

“The new governess, ma’am,” said the man apologetically.

“Oh!” said the lady, surveying Joyce with no very gratified expression. “You look extremely young.”

There was an awkward pause for a moment, Joyce being too much disconcerted by a glance from the gentleman over his wife’s head to make any reply.

The little lady passed on into the dining-room, saying as she went :

“You will find some one to attend to you upstairs. Brown, ring for the housemaid.”

Brown, having already summoned that domestic, lest he might be called upon to suffer the indignity of showing the governess upstairs, handed Joyce over to her, and

followed his master and mistress into the dining-room.

“Really, Major Ponsonby,” began the lady, as she seated herself at the table, “you *might* have told me that you had engaged an improper character to look after your children. I think I might at *least* have been consulted as to the *sort* of person you meant to engage.”

“My love, really,” said the Major in some confusion, “I begged and implored you to go there yourself, or at least to have the young woman sent for inspection ; but you insisted on my getting one at once—you know you did, my love.”

“I am perfectly aware, Major, that you have *no* consideration whatever for my feelings or state of health. That you could ever have *suggested* that I should spend *hours* in that dreadful noisy room among all those *horrid* people, shows the *greatest*



want of consideration for me in every way ;” and Mrs. Ponsonby applied her handkerchief to her eyes, and her smelling-bottle to her nose.

“ My love, I offered to go directly,” said the Major penitently.

“ Oh, of course. I know that,” said Mrs. Ponsonby, bristling up again, and speaking in a whining complaining voice. “ I know you are only *too* delighted to have the chance to introduce creatures of the *lowest* character into this house, so long as they have pretty faces for you to look at. You needn’t tell *me*.”

“ My dear, how can you talk such preposterous nonsense ! as if I wanted to look at any face besides yours !” returned her husband gallantly.

“ Oh, you need not think you deceive me by fine *speeches*,” Mrs. Ponsonby whined. “ I am *convinced* there is some-

thing wrong about this girl. She has just that objectionable style that men consider beautiful ; *why*, I *never* can see. To my thinking, such colour and vivacity are positively *vulgar*. But there, my opinion is *never* asked on anything."

"My dear, you told me yourself that they never had any but the most respectable people at the Soho Bazaar."

"Yes, and I am sure whenever I have been there, there have been nothing but the greatest *frights* possible in the rooms. How you *could* have found such a creature there, I don't know. But men *always* look out for pretty faces. You are *sure* that that horrid creature in alpaca said she had excellent references?"

"Oh, quite sure," said the Major hurriedly. "She hadn't papers with her—the girl, I mean—because she had not been out before ; but she is most respectable, an

officer's daughter, in reduced circumstances of course, and, ah—in fact the girl is rather cut up at having to go out, and doesn't like to be spoken to on the subject."

"She need not fear being spoken to by *me*," said Mrs. Ponsonby. "*I* am not accustomed to converse with nursery-governesses, and I must *beg* that you will not do so either."

"Oh dear no, of course not," said Major Ponsonby hurriedly, and immediately led the conversation to other matters.

Meanwhile Joyce had been shown upstairs to the second floor where the nurseries were situated. They were two large airy rooms, one looking into the square, and the other into a mews at the back. In them were three little children, a sunny-faced pretty baby of three, who was sitting up in a little cot, refusing to lie down and go to sleep, a proceeding the under-housemaid

was representing to her in forcible terms as her obvious duty; a boy of four, who was playing in a half-dressed condition on the floor; and a demure, delicate-looking girl of eight, who, in a soiled but very gay fashionable little costume, was surveying the whole scene with looks of intense disgust.

"This is your new governess, Miss Ada," said the upper housemaid.

Miss Ada honoured the new comer with a disdainful stare, while the little boy hastily scrambled into bed and covered himself with clothes, leaving only one eye and a portion of a tangled curly head visible.

"Will you kiss me, dear?" said Joyce, shyly coming forward.

She did not know what to do with the two women looking on, and was sadly afraid she might say or do something that would be woefully out of place in a nursery-governess.



"No," said the child, looking Joyce full in the face.

Joyce was rather taken aback by this prompt refusal and the composed look of the little creature. She stood abashed, not knowing what to do next.

"That child don't take to nobody," remarked the upper-housemaid, after a moment's pause.

"They are the crossest children that ever was," said the under-housemaid, endeavouring to cover up the infant rebel in the cot and failing signally in so doing. "I am sure I am glad you are come, miss," she added, turning to Joyce. "A blessed hour have I been here trying to put them to bed, and see this hardened little thing, and with a delicate chest ; it's as much as my place is worth to leave her sitting up like this. Lie down, you little torment, do !"

“ I dare say I shall be able to manage her,” said Joyce, taking off her hat ; “ she is a sweet little creature.”

“ Then I’ll go down to my tea,” said the girl, willingly relinquishing her post. “ Shall I bring you up some, miss ? ” she asked civilly.

“ Yes, if you please,” said Joyce ; and the two women departed.

Left to herself with the children, Joyce proceeded to ingratiate herself with them. Lifting the little boy out of the bed and seating him in her lap, she began to undress him. He was too shy to resent her doing so, but only kept his baby arm across his eyes. She soon had him in his little cot beside the baby’s, and then sitting down by them, she promised to sing to them if they would both lie down.

The baby appeared too much astonished at the suggestion to offer any opposition to Joyce’s laying her down and tucking her

in; and this accomplished, Joyce sang nursery rhymes and fragments of old Indian airs to them, until her tea was brought up. They were both wide awake and staring, but seemingly so impressed with the novelty of the situation that they remained perfectly still when Joyce went into the other room, and in a few minutes they were fast asleep.

Joyce's attention was now directed to the elder child. She was sitting with her hands before her, like a little old woman, when she came into the day-nursery.

"Are you not aware that it is nearly half-past seven, and you have not dressed me yet?" she asked in tones of displeasure.

"Do you go to bed too, now?" asked Joyce pleasantly.

The tiny mite looked extremely offended, and drew herself up with much comical gravity.

"I am not a baby!" she said; "I go into the drawing-room to mamma every evening at half-past seven, and you must dress me accordingly."

"Certainly; tell me where your dresses are," said Joyce.

The child rose—she was very small and thin for her age—and pointed out a chest of drawers in the night-nursery.

"You can have the upper drawers for yourself," she remarked condescendingly. "I suppose you have some luggage. I don't like that dress at all."

"Yes, I have some," said Joyce, beginning to feel a certain distaste for the child's remarks. "Which dress are you to wear?" she continued, turning over a disordered pile of children's clothing, all apparently in great want of repair.

"That will do; there is no company to-

night," said the child, selecting a pretty blue and white muslin.

Joyce dressed her in it, and was shocked to find the ragged condition her under-clothing was in. There was no time to remedy such defects now, however, and she sent her down to the drawing-room—a dainty little creature outside, but wofully out of repair underneath.

As soon as she had finished her tea, Joyce hunted about the room for a work-box. She found one at last, pushed away in a drawer, and in a state of great confusion. After tidying it, she proceeded to mend a fresh supply of clothes for to-morrow for the children; for she noticed that they were all in the same tattered condition, notwithstanding that there seemed a great abundance of garments of all sorts in the room.

Presently Ada came back again, looking very much bored and out of humour.

"I have not enjoyed myself to-night," she remarked, as Joyce undressed her; "my mamma has not been in a good temper—she very often is not when there is only papa at home. I prefer my mamma when she has several visitors; she is always much more agreeable then. You are extremely awkward about my hair; I presume you have not been used to dressing young ladies' hair."

"No, I have not," said Joyce, secretly much amused.

"I thought not," said the child complacently. "Our last governess was very good at that. She had a great many faults: she used to slap us, and neglect us dreadfully, and then threaten to punish us if we told mamma, but she never pulled my hair."

"I will try and not do so again," said Joyce demurely.

"That is well," said the small person

approvingly. "By the way, you have not told me your name yet?"

"Mary Dillon," said Joyce, with a deep blush; "that is what you must call me, at least."

"No," said the young lady, correcting her, "*Miss* Dillon. We always call our governess 'Miss;' it makes the servants more respectful."

"Very well," said Joyce.

While she was folding up the child's things, after she was in bed, she was surprised on turning round to see her sitting up intently regarding her.

"Won't you lie down, dear?" she said, coming towards her. "I am afraid you will catch cold."

"I am looking at you," replied the child. "I am glad to see you mean to mend our things. Miss Jones never did. But on the whole I think mamma was right."

"What do you mean?" asked Joyce, covering her up.

The child looked at her shrewdly, and with an air that strongly reminded Joyce of her mother.

"I shall not tell you now," she said. "Mamma often says things to annoy papa, and I dare say this was one of them. I don't think you are at all like a governess, but then they all begin well at first," said the young philosopher, with an aged sigh. "Good-night, Miss Dillon. I hope you will go on as you have begun." And Ada laid her precocious little head upon its pillow.

"What an awful child!" said Joyce to herself, as she went back to the day-nursery; "and what poor neglected little mites they all seem!"

The next morning Joyce was rather surprised at not receiving either a visit or a message from her new mistress. She had

gathered from Ada and the under-housemaid, who brought up the breakfast, what her duties were, so she managed to get on very well. She took the children into the square garden directly after their breakfast, and then as the sun grew hot they came in, and she heard Ada read and learn a little French, and taught Maurice, the boy, his letters. They were all very good and quiet with her, apparently rather surprised at her gentleness of tone and manner, and the younger ones were still shy and silent.

"You will soon find out what they are," said Ada to her, after she had made some remark about their quietness; "they are shy now, and afraid of you—they always are of strangers; but you will soon see what naughty troublesome little things they are. Miss Jones was always slapping them, and they never improved a bit."

"I should think not," said Joyce indig-

nantly. "You don't suppose I am going to slap them, do you?"

The child looked at her queerly.

"You will never manage them if you don't," she said decisively.

Towards twelve Joyce noticed that all her young charges grew slightly fidgety, as though in expectation of something happening, and both Maurice's and little Edith's eyes seemed glued to the door, so persistently did they watch it.

"Oh, I didn't tell you," said Ada, in answer to Joyce's inquiry as to what they expected. "Our mamma does not very often come here. I dare say you have been wondering why she has not come to-day; but she is delicate. She has lived in India a good deal. But our papa comes every day to play with us at half-past twelve, before he goes to his lunch. We dine at half-past one also."

“Dere pappa,” said Maurice, slipping down from his chair and going towards the door, while Edith gave a little scream of delight.

Major Ponsonby opened the door and came in, and was immediately surrounded by his children. He came forward with them all clinging about him, and held out his hand to Joyce.

“How do you do?” he said. “I hope things are comfortable for you. You must excuse my wife’s coming up ; she has dreadfully bad health.”

The tone and manner were those of a gentleman addressing an equal, and he shook hands heartily.

Joyce felt quite grateful to him ; and the pink colour rushed into her face as she replied and assured him she found everything very nice.

He went on talking for a few moments,

about the children and the weather, and observed that he had seen her in the square that morning, when he was interrupted by Ada.

“Papa,” she exclaimed, “is Miss Dillon different to Miss Jones? You used not to talk to her like that.”

Major Ponsonby laughed a little awkwardly, and pulled Ada’s ear.

“You have not good manners, Puss,” he said playfully; then turning to Joyce, he added: “This is a dreadful specimen of the *enfant terrible*, Miss Dillon. She always manages to find the things she ought not to say, and then says them.”

“I don’t, papa,” cried Ada, her face flushing; “but you never *did* like Miss Jones, and you do like Miss Dillon; and you speak to her as if——”

“Little girls mustn’t chatter so,” said her father, and immediately began a game of

romps with the younger ones, leaving Joyce very crimson and annoyed by the conversation.

She went on with her sewing while the Major played with his children, and tried to feel unconcerned and indifferent ; but she could not do so, and whenever she chanced to lift her eyes from her work, so surely did she find Major Ponsonby's gaze upon her face. However, very little more conversation took place, and he went down to his lunch soon after one, and she gave the children their dinner.

She asked Ada what they did in the afternoons.

"Mamma goes out for a drive after lunch," the child answered. "Now and then—not very often—I go with her. Sometimes we go for a walk, or we play here. Mamma comes in at four and has tea. Generally she has visitors. We all

go down then for half an hour ; and we have our best frocks on. Sometimes she does not come in to tea, and then of course we do not go down. Papa will have dinner at half-past six, because he likes going to the club and the theatres. Mamma does not like dining so early ; but she often goes out to dinner, or has people here ; and then dinner is later. I think it is selfish of papa to dine then, for she does not like it at all ; but he generally dines at the club, unless there is company, so it does not matter much really."

"What a dreadful sort of existence!" thought Joyce to herself. "They seem to lead quite distinct lives—not like husband and wife a bit ; and how miserable it is that the child sees it!"

"I don't think, dear," she said gently, "that if I were you I would talk about my papa and mamma as you do. You are



a little girl still, and of course cannot understand the reasons grown-up people have for doing things. Doubtless your papa has a very good reason for doing what you call selfish things, so it's better not to talk like that."

"No, he hasn't," said the child decisively. "My mamma says he is a very selfish man, and that he cares only for his own pleasures."

"You must not repeat such things," said Joyce firmly. "You do not understand what your mamma meant, and you must not repeat what she says."

Ada looked but half convinced.

"I know mamma is jealous——" she was beginning, when Joyce stopped her with a peremptory command to hold her tongue, delivered in such a forcible manner that it compelled Miss Ada's obedience.



CHAPTER VII.

“**M**ISS DILLON,” said Ada to Joyce one morning, about two months after Joyce’s arrival in Loftus Square, “I do not understand you at all.”

“How is that?” asked Joyce, smiling.

“You need not laugh, Miss Dillon. I observe you often laugh when I speak, and I consider it very rude of you. But my mamma does not understand you either.”

“Indeed,” said Joyce, rather piqued, “your mamma has had very little opportunity of knowing anything about me.”

“Of course mamma does not care for



governesses' society," said Ada gravely. "She is different to papa. She is of much better family than he is. I have heard Mrs. Benson say so. But what mamma and I do not understand is, that being so pretty as you are—for you are pretty, you know, Miss Dillon—you never seem to care to come into the drawing-room for us, or to want to see anybody, or wear pretty dresses and like to have attention paid you. Miss Jones was always trying to see visitors, and so was Miss Aldridge ; but she was very pretty, and Miss Jones was not. Mamma was very angry with Miss Aldridge, and sent her away one morning in a hurry. She never told me why, but I think——"

"Go on with your lessons," said Joyce, sternly.

"Yes, presently ; but, Miss Dillon, why don't you wear pretty dresses, and why do

you cry so often here in the dark by yourself? I can hear you sometimes when you think I am asleep. Have you done anything naughty?"

"No," said Joyce, her face flushing and her eyes filling with tears, for the "no," though stoutly uttered, could not come from the depths of that aching little heart. Time and loneliness, and the need of patience and self-control, were beginning to reveal to Joyce truths of which she had had no idea before. In pain and quietness she was learning slowly the ingratitude and error into which she had fallen. Now that she was homeless she saw the value of the home that had been given her, and at this distance of time she could appreciate the real kindness that had been showered upon her graceless head.

She tried very hard to keep from thinking of Charrington, telling herself that she

had been wretched there, and that she had been unjustly treated. But the recollection of it tortured her by day and kept her awake at night, and day and night alike the grave tender face of the man she loved haunted her like the spectre of a being she had wronged. Yet she was bitter against him for having appeared to be her friend while believing (as she supposed he did) in her father's crime. She told herself that she was angry with him, and would never forgive him ; but in her heart she knew that her seeming anger was but the despair of her hopeless love. So Joyce was not happy, in fact she was very miserable, and nothing but the hope of one day getting back to the freedom of her old forest life enabled her to bear the repression and dreariness of her present situation. In one sense she had plenty of freedom, in that her mistress never interfered in nursery details,

only requiring the children to be sent downstairs sufficiently well dressed for half an hour in the afternoons. So Joyce had her own way with them entirely, but she could never leave them at all. They were delicate and nervous, and frightened at being left alone for an instant, and were evidently the victims of unprincipled nurses. They required much patient soothing and care, and exercised to the utmost limits Joyce's powers of self-control and patience; two virtues with which she had had little intimate acquaintance before.

She grew thin and pale, and her eyes had a wistful look in them, as though their owner found life too heavy for her to bear alone; and as her empty days passed drearily by with no prospect of lightening for many months to come, Joyce felt as if her heart must break. She never dreamt of going back to her uncle—such a proceeding



would have been worse to her than her silent misery. That episode in her life was done with and laid aside. She would die, but she would never go back.

So this poor little would-be heroine, in her ignorance and rashness, and want of a loving hand to help her, toiled on through September's sultry days, and into October's autumn sweetness. She was terribly weary of London. It felt like a huge prison to her, and the sight of the sickly yellow in the leaves of the dusty trees in the square made her heart sick with longing for the glorious autumns in the far-away forests.

She had been two months in her place, and had received a little over four pounds ; and part of this she had been obliged to spend on new boots, and one or two little articles of clothing that were indispensably necessary. It would be months before she would get enough to pay her passage out.

She had no valuable possessions that she could turn into money. There was her father's watch, but she would not part with that; and besides that she had only one little jewel, a ring he had given her. It would be a pang to part with it, but still it might be well to know how much it was worth in case she should be driven to do so. So one day in November she asked the under-housemaid to wait the return of the children from the drawing-room, while she went out for a few minutes.

There was another reason why she was becoming almost morbidly anxious to get her passage-money together. Shortly after she had come to Loftus Square, Major Ponsonby went to Scotland for six weeks. Since his return about the middle of October he had several times filled her with a vague alarm by his manner towards her. He came every day as usual to play with his children;



but he came earlier now, and did not confine his attention to them, but talked to her instead. Joyce was pleased at first. It was a comfort to have some one to talk to besides the children, and she showed her pleasure at seeing him, and began to look forward to his morning visits.

He drew her into their games after a little while, and, had he not done so, unsuspecting Joyce might have even gone on encouraging his attentions for a considerable time. But an undefinable something in his way of catching hold of her during a game of blind man's buff gave her a sort of shock she had never experienced before. It was a very little thing, a mere lingering of his hand about her shoulder, but it gave the girl a rude awakening to one of the vicious sides of human nature. She was never again drawn into any other games when he was there. She either made his presence

an excuse for leaving the children a little while, or else she had some sewing or trifling work she must finish. She took to avoiding him, too, in the square, where he often came on pretence of smoking a cigar, and she generally watched him out of the house before she went downstairs of an afternoon for the children's walk. He had never said anything to her respecting her change of manner towards him, for she carefully gave him no opportunity of speaking to her in private, invariably retaining Ada, whose quickness proved of some use to her now, by her side. But he often, so she fancied, tried to get speech with her alone ; and all this tended to make her anxious and unhappy.

On this afternoon, when she had resolved to slip out and ascertain the value of her ring, should she be driven to sell it, she had supposed him to be in the drawing-room



with some visitors, consequently she was much annoyed on turning the corner of the square to meet him coming towards her.

She blushed and looked confused. She did not wish him to know the object of her coming out.

"Where are you going?" he said, turning and walking beside her.

"Oh, only a little way," she answered; "don't let me keep you, please."

"You can't help doing so," he said, with a peculiar smile, as he bent over her a little. "You have been very chary of your company to me lately."

"I have been busy. The children wanted their winter clothes," said Joyce evasively.

"You take too much trouble over those children," he replied. "No one else has ever bothered about them as you do. You don't give yourself any rest."

"I hope you think they are improved?" said Joyce.

"Very much so," he answered; "even their mother has noticed it. But it is not about the children that I wanted to speak to you; it is about yourself. Do you know you are getting pale and thin?"

"Oh, it's only London; I am not used to cities," said Joyce, blushing.

"I wonder," he went on, looking steadfastly at her, "what you are used to. Not this sort of life, I am sure."

"Oh, it suits me very well indeed," replied Joyce hurriedly. "Please don't stay any longer. I am only going to a shop."

"You always want to send me away," he replied, in a grieved tone of voice. "How can you be so cruel, Miss Dillon?"

"There are visitors at home; you ought to go and see them."

“Hang visitors!” he replied, keeping close beside her; “I mean to have this out with you. Why do you always avoid me as if I were a monster of some sort?”

“I don’t avoid you,” faltered Joyce, knowing perfectly well that she did.

“Yes, you do. You know you do. You have scarcely spoken to me for a fortnight. Don’t you think you are very hard upon me? You know what my wife is, how she nags at me from morning to night. You know I get no peace with her. The only bright bit of my day was that hour in the nursery, and now you scarcely ever speak to me. You might make a little sunshine in a poor fellow’s life for him, Miss Dillon.”

He looked so very inoffensive and ill-used, and what he said about his wife was so perfectly true, that Joyce’s heart smote her with a sense of compunction. Perhaps

she had taken offence where none was meant, and had been suspicious and unwomanly in her thoughts. She coloured crimson as she replied to him :

“ I am sorry if I have been rude.”

He saw the blush and the change of manner, and followed up his advantage.

“ I don’t want to complain of my wife,” he said, knowing perfectly well that she would not listen to him if he did ; “ but you must allow, Miss Dillon, that a little laughter and cheerfulness makes the days go by much more happily, and to know when I am very dull and miserable that I can always find a comfortable cheerfulness and a quiet friendship in the nursery is a great deal to me. Won’t you let us be friends ?”

She was quite humbled and ashamed now.

“ Oh yes, I shall be so glad,” she mur-

mured ; " I am very sorry if I have been rude."

" And you will let me come and talk to you again—not run away and hide? I enjoyed our talks so much."

" Yes," said Joyce.

" Are you going in here ?" he asked, as she paused before a jeweller's shop, uncertain whether to go in or not.

" Yes—that is, I want to ask a question," she answered.

He glanced down at her with an amused smile.

" I will wait for you," he said. " Now don't refuse, or I shall think you mean to keep at arm's length again."

She did not know what to say, so left him and went timidly inside, and producing her ring, asked the value of it. It was more than she had expected, and she came out again, pleased at this discovery.

She was immediately joined by Major Ponsonby, and they walked home together.

The next day, and the next, and every day for a week, she saw a good deal of her master. He joined her during her walks, and sat in the nursery of a morning, and altogether contrived to be much in her society. She was not quite comfortable with him. There was something that she silently resented in his manner, and sometimes in his speech, but there was never anything she could lay hold of, or raise objections against; it was rather a subtle pervading odour that was always present, but could never precisely be detected at any particular moment. She was fearful too of making any more blunders, or fancying things to exist that had no real foundation in fact; so she was careful not to take offence, even when a little of the scrupulous veneering of deference wore off,

and she caught glimpses of the man's real nature beneath.

She was in a difficult position ; she dared not resent his increasing familiarity for fear of mistaking his intentions and committing a dreadful blunder ; on the other hand, she felt that even to let things go on as they were was undesirable. She could not help noticing, too, that Mrs. Ponsonby was more than usually short and stern with her, and that even Ada drew back a little and regarded her with less friendly eyes.

She had never got on so well with Ada as with the other two children. She was a clever precocious child, and unfortunately far more of her mother's confidante and friend than she ought to have been. She was like her mother in face and disposition, being querulous and intensely selfish, with a repining jealous temper and a strong

disposition to consider herself ill-used. Accordingly, when she found that Joyce was not at all inclined to regard her as of more consequence than the little ones, or to submit to her whims and exactions, she drew away from the girl and resented all her little approaches to friendliness and a better understanding.

"She is her mother's child," her father said of her one day when she was unusually sulky and cross. "It is lucky you have no clandestine lover, Miss Dillon, for she would certainly find it all out, and tell her mother if you had."

Joyce's only answer had been a furious blush, at which the Major had laughed in rather a meaning manner.

About a week after her visit to the jeweller's shop, Joyce was astonished to find in her workbox one evening a small packet addressed to herself. That it had

not been there in the morning she felt quite sure, and she opened it with some hesitation. What was her surprise to find in it a very pretty little gold brooch with a circle of pearls round it.

She coloured crimson with shame and vexation. It could have come from no one but Major Ponsonby, and what could he think of her to make her such a present as that !

“Oh, what shall I do !” she cried to herself. “I am sure I ought not to keep it—it is lovely too, but I know I ought not ; but how can I return it to him ? What am I to say ? Oh, it was mean and wicked and horrid of him to put me in such a position !”

Just then her eye fell upon a little scrap of paper that had fallen from the case when she opened it. She picked it up and read, “From Major and Mrs. Ponsonby.”

“Oh, what a wretch I am !” she

exclaimed, clasping her hands over her face; "what a mean, dreadful, wicked wretch I am to fancy such horrible shameful things! How shall I ever look in his face again after such thoughts? How he would despise me if he knew, and I am sure I despise myself; but oh, why *will* he stare so, and hold my hand so long? It's dreadfully difficult to know what people mean. I declare I don't know what has come to me lately to make me suspect everybody."

She longed to run down and thank her benefactors, but she knew that they were dining out, and probably would not be in until very late. Moreover, she was shy of entering into Mrs. Ponsonby's presence uncalled for.

She knew that Mrs. Ponsonby did not rise until eleven, so she could not see her before then, and she resolved that when the



Major came upstairs she would go down and seek her. Something made her feel that she would like to thank the lady first for her present; and she was debating what she would say while superintending the children's lessons the next morning—they rarely went out now in the cold weather—when she heard an unusual bustle downstairs, and shortly afterwards a carriage drove away.

“That is mamma,” said Ada. “She said good-bye to me when I went downstairs to see her at her breakfast.”

“Has she gone away?” asked Joyce in some surprise.

“She is going to stay for some days at Redhill,” replied Ada. “Do you know, I think she and papa have had a quarrel; for I heard her saying something about ‘other attractions at home’ when I went in to-day, and she seemed angry.”

“You ought not to listen ; and you must not repeat things,” said Joyce severely, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

Just then Major Ponsonby came in. He seemed in unusually good spirits, and laughed off Joyce’s attempts at thanks. He was very friendly and pleasant, and Joyce felt more at her ease with him than she had done for some time.

In a few days when she went to him to be paid—he made a point of paying everyone in his house monthly—she was surprised at his giving her a five-pound note instead of the usual two pounds one and eightpence.

“I feel quite ashamed of myself,” he said as he gave it her, “for having allowed you to go on all this time on the miserable pittance you have received. Had I been at home last month I should have seen to it earlier ; but, as you know, my wife has no idea of the value of money.”

“But I thought I was receiving quite a large salary for a nursery-governess,” said Joyce, much astonished.

“Nonsense,” he said, smiling. “Why my cook has forty pounds a year. My dear Miss Dillon, you must allow me to know the market value of your services better than you do yourself. I assure you you are most remarkably cheap at sixty pounds a year. The children have never been so well taken care of in their lives,” he added kindly, seeing she looked distressed. “I assure you you have saved me twenty pounds in doctors’ bills. Pray say no more on the subject.”

“I am very much obliged to you,” said Joyce bluntly, looking at the note in her hand; “and I think I ought to tell you that the more money I get the sooner I shall leave you.”

“You don’t mean to say you think of

going away ?” he asked, with great concern in his tones.

“ I never meant to stay long,” said Joyce, shamefacedly putting down the note, which she felt she had obtained under false pretences ; “ I have other plans in view.”

“ The deuce you have !” he said, evidently very much annoyed ; then, looking at her pretty face all aglow with shame and distress, he added, “ What a fool I have been to dream of keeping you to such slavery ! I don’t know how you have stayed so long. Miss Dillon, confide in me. Why are you in a situation at all ?”

“ Oh, I couldn’t tell you, indeed !” she cried, frightened at the thought of confession ; “ and, if you please, I don’t want to go away yet !”

It was perhaps well for her that she did not see the smile that came into his eyes.

“ No, you won’t go away yet, will you ?”

he said, entreatingly. "Think of my poor little children. No, I see you don't believe that plea from me. Well, think of me then. What should I do without my one little ray of sunshine in this great dreary house? Now I have vexed you again. Come, Miss Dillon, I didn't mean that either, if it vexed you. Let us be friends."

"Then please don't speak to me like that," she said, with some dignity.

"Very well, I won't. But you must take this money; upon my word and honour you have fairly earned it: ask Mrs. Benson if you don't believe me."

Mrs. Benson was the housekeeper, and on Joyce's asking her in a casual manner whether governesses ever received as much as sixty pounds a year, she was much comforted by the old woman's assuring her that her mistress when she was young never had a governess worth less than a hundred a

year; so Joyce added the five-pound note to her other savings with a good conscience.

It was just a fortnight after Mrs. Ponsonby had left, and Joyce was sitting one evening in the nursery, when a parcel was brought for her by the post. On opening it she discovered a beautiful little pearl and turquoise ring that exactly fitted her. But one person could have sent it to her, and for a moment she was angry at his doing so. Then the doubt arose in her mind whether it might not have come from Mrs. Ponsonby. She looked at the writing—it was a strange hand to her, it might be her mistress's. Anyhow she felt that she ought to make some inquiries, so she rang her bell and asked if Major Ponsonby was downstairs and alone. He was in the study by himself, so she went down. She had no scruple in doing so, as of late he had asked her to come down and bear him company

in his wife's absence ; but she had never done so, though several times he had come into the nursery of an evening and had talked to her for an hour or so. He sprang up as she came into the room and took her hands in his, and leading her forward to the fire placed her in a comfortable seat, and then stood looking down upon her.

“ So you have conquered your scruples at last,” he said, smiling, while she was blushing and wondering how to begin. From the moment she entered the room she saw that she had made a mistake.

“ No ; I came to ask you if you knew where this came from,” she said, showing him the case and the ring.

He took it slowly out and looked at it, balancing it on his little finger.

“ Does it fit ?” he said, taking her hand and trying to put it on her finger.

She snatched her hand away.

"I don't want it. I would rather not have it," she said.

"You are unkind, and silly," he replied. "You let my wife, who does not care half as much about the children as I do, give you a brooch, and you won't let me, who appreciate your goodness to them ten times as much as she does, give you even this paltry little bit of trumpery. Well, if you won't have it, nobody else ever shall ;" and he was about to throw it into the blazing fire when she stopped him.

"Forgive me if I have been stupid and rude," she said penitently—for he had made her feel ashamed of herself again—"but I—I didn't understand ; how could I ?"

"You are a silly little prude," he said, smiling and drawing a low chair up beside her. "No, don't move away," as he laid his hand on her shoulder. "One would think I was going to eat you. You are

such a shy, startled little thing. So you won't take this ring?"

"No," said Joyce, dreadfully puzzled what to say; "at least I don't know what to do. I think I would sooner you didn't, please."

"Nonsense! Let me see if it will fit. Yours are such little hands, I am afraid it is too big."

"Oh!" said Joyce, putting her hands behind her, and knitting her brow in perplexity. "Oh dear, I don't know what to do!"

"Do! why, stay here and talk to me a little. You don't know how glad I am you came. I was just wondering whether I might dare to go up and see you."

"I would rather go back! Edith will wake up—Ada is not asleep!" cried poor Joyce, fully aware of her mistake now.

"No, you are not to get up," he said,

detaining her as she strove to rise. "I want to say something to you first. Mary, you must have seen——"

Joyce shrieked—a little hand was suddenly laid upon her shoulder, and a shrill little voice said :

"Why did you go away and leave us, Miss Dillon ? Was it because you wanted to talk to papa ?"

"You confounded little imp," said her father, "be off to your bed at once ! What do you mean by coming down like this ?"

"I'll carry her !" said Joyce, trembling and scarcely able to keep back her tears. "Don't hinder me—I will !" and snatching up the puny little creature in her arms, Joyce rushed upstairs, half blinded by her tears.

"What are you crying for ?" asked Ada. "Was it because I came and stopped your talking ? Mamma says the governesses

and papa are always talking together. She doesn't like it."

"No, no, no!" sobbed poor Joyce. "Oh, Ada, I don't like your papa!"

"Oh, but you do, though!" cried the child excitedly. "Why, what is that on your finger? He must have put it there. You hadn't it on when you undressed me. You must like him, Miss Dillon, if you let him give you things!"

"He didn't give it me; it isn't mine," cried Joyce, in a fury tearing the ring from her hand and throwing it across the room. "Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do!"

"I know what *I* shall do," said Ada, very sedately sitting up in bed; "I shall tell mamma all about it. I don't think it is proper for papa to give you rings. He used to give Jane, the housemaid, money, but never rings. Mamma said it was because she was pretty, and that he never

can resist a pretty face ; but she was not so pretty as you ; that is why he gives you rings, I suppose. But mamma was very angry about it, and sent Jane away. I hope she won't send you away though, because you are kind to us."

"Oh, don't—don't, Ada!" sobbed Joyce, laying her head upon the pillow, and weeping as if her heart would break.

"Well, I won't tell," said Ada, seeking to comfort her. "Don't cry, Miss Dillon ; papa won't let you be turned away, I am sure. I saw him come in and take up one of your gloves and kiss it the other day when he thought nobody was there, so he must be very fond of you. And I like you too," continued Ada, throwing her arms about Joyce's neck and kissing her.

The humiliation of Joyce's position was more than she could bear. Now that her eyes were really opened to the character of

Major Ponsonby, she felt that the sooner she quitted his house the better for herself. So she checked her indignant tears as soon as she could, and directly Ada was asleep set about softly collecting her various articles of clothing, and packing them in a bundle. She would not risk detection by taking her portmanteau with her, for it was too big for her to carry by herself. So she made a bundle of the most valuable of her clothing, with her treasured gun-case, and having fastened her money in her dress, and placed the brooch, which she now believed Mrs. Ponsonby knew nothing about, on the table, she waited for the early morning hours.

She knew that there was a side-door leading from one of the servants' approaches of the house, and this she believed she could unfasten; so about five o'clock, when all was still, she stole softly down the stairs.

The children were not likely to wake until eight—they usually slept heavily in the morning, after being wakeful and fretful up till about three—so she had little fear in leaving them alone.

In a few minutes she was out in the cold street, with a bleak wind cutting her face and hands, and the great homeless, stony city wrapped in darkness around her.





CHAPTER VIII.

TO be homeless and friendless in the streets of London, having very little money in one's pocket, at five o'clock on a November morning, with a sharp north-east wind blowing, is neither inspiriting, hopeful, nor comfortable.

Joyce felt very cold and very miserable as she trudged down the bleak cheerless streets. She was too wretched even to feel very angry with Major Ponsonby. She had brought herself into a position in which he considered he could with impunity insult her, and even suppose that she would be

pleased at the form of his doing so. How was he to know that she was different from any of the common girls who, as Ada had said, *liked* "to talk to papa," and to receive presents from him? Joyce, in her new sense of incompetence and humiliation, blamed herself more than she blamed him; for the first time in her life reversing matters when she should have kept them straight, for beyond all doubt she had behaved better and led a nobler life since she had been in Loftus Square, than she had in her wilfulness and childishness at Charrington Rectory. But Joyce was developing rapidly into a woman, and with her first sense of womanhood came a real humility and lack of confidence in her own powers to which hitherto she had been a stranger.

She remembered her thoughts on going to Charrington. "I will make them like me; they shall be proud of me," had been

the tenour of her feelings. And what had come of them? She had left behind her a name whose very mention would make them blush. So much for the value of her resolutions and deeds.

Joyce owned to herself as she walked along the wintry streets that she was a failure, and her heart was sore and heavy at the discovery. She would have given much for a friendly word, poor child, at this season of her great misgiving. She had doubted other people, she had never doubted herself before. Life and hope had been so strong within her that any wrong or failing must have come, so she had felt, from without. Now she was humbled and cast down, with scarcely energy enough to shape a dim plan for the future. She was cold to her very heart, and sick and numb with despair.

Even now she never thought of going

back to Charrington. It would be like going back to ask forgiveness for having believed in her father's innocence. Joyce could not bring herself to do that, even if she could have brought herself to face the man she had run away from, and the man she counted it a shame to love. The very thought of the latter was a spur to move her forward. She set her face against the pitiless wind and moved eastward, looking up with a sort of dread at the silent Charing Cross Station as she passed it, big and desolate in spite of its gas lamps in the dim morning air.

There were very few people moving about at that early hour, and no shops where she could enter and get a breakfast would be open till some time later on. She did not like to stop at the coffee stalls at the corners of the streets, though she envied the labouring men who stood around them

drinking tins of hot coffee, and eating huge slices of bread.

As she entered St. Paul's Churchyard the clocks struck eight. She had walked a long way, and was faint and weary. Fortunately an eating-house was being opened as she passed it, and she went in and asked for some coffee and bread. The people were civil and the food good; and one of the waitresses, a girl no older than herself, bade her come near the fire in an inner room and warm herself. Joyce did so, for she was feeling sick and numbed with the cold. The girl, who evidently regarded her with some sort of compassion, remarked :

“You are out early, to-day.”

“Yes,” said Joyce; “I have far to go.”

“Have you got a good sit——” the girl began, but a second glance at Joyce, and perhaps something in the refinement of her

voice, seemed to alter her opinion, for she changed her question with a rather more respectful and colder manner, and asked, "Do you wish anything more, miss?"

"No, thank you," said Joyce; "at least I suppose you don't happen to know how often the steamers for New York sail from London, do you?"

"No, miss; but there's a morning paper here if you like to look at it."

There was very little information in it about steamers from London to New York, but plenty of notices about steamers from Southampton or Liverpool. Joyce gravely went over the subject of her finances. She had just seven pounds ten shillings—a small sum to go to another world with. She thought of her ring; she must sell that—she would get about three pounds for it; that would raise her funds to ten guineas. It was clear that she would have

to go in the steerage—not a pleasant prospect for a refined girl to contemplate. But she sternly put all considerations of pleasantness aside. The passage would cost her six pounds; it would not do to land in New York absolutely penniless, and she might have expenses during her voyage. She might fall ill, or have to pay some extras not in the advertisement. It was clear that she must not spend more than one pound more in England.

She paid for her breakfast and went out again. The sun had risen as well as he could, and was doing a very feeble best to pierce the cloud of smoke that enveloped London. There was just a faint glitter on the cross at the top of the great cathedral as Joyce looked wonderingly up at it. She had never seen it before, and she felt that she ought to admire it vastly, but it did not please her much. It was so cold, and

dirty, and had such ugly square windows, and sharp lines. Joyce knew nothing about architecture, but she felt in her soul that the monstrous pile was an ugly one, and did not feel sufficiently interested to go inside it.

Had she done so she might have met some one coming down the great nave with one of the minor canons who would have surprised her a good deal. Archdeacon Hyde had been to the eight o'clock service, and was now deep in a musical discussion with one of the cathedral body.

"By the way," said the minor canon, as they came down the great steps together not more than a moment after Joyce had passed them by, "did you tell me you were in town on business?"

"I came up for the E. C. U.," said the Archdeacon; "but I also want to see a friend of mine at Greenwich, who has been

aiding and abetting a son of mine in a rather undesirable project. I suppose you have not heard the sad trouble one of my sons has been to us?"

"No, I have heard nothing; but I am very sorry to hear it now."

"Ah, well!" said the Archdeacon with a heavy sigh; "it's a bad business—a terrible shock to us all. He has made a low marriage. We have done all we can to keep it from his sisters, but I suppose it must come out in time."

"What a sad thing for you all!" said the minor canon sympathisingly. "It is very bad when a man goes and marries beneath him. Is it quite a hopeless case?"

"Quite, quite. A farmer's daughter in the parish, too! It's a dreadful business!"

"No fellow has any right to carry on in his father's parish," said the minor canon conclusively: "it's bad form;" and the two

clergymen came down the steps and proceeded to Dean's Yard.

Joyce of course knew nothing of her escape ; had she known her uncle was so close by, she would not have lingered so long over the jewellers' shops in Cornhill. They all looked so gorgeous with their sparkling gems in the window, that she did not like to enter any of them. At last finding one of humbler pretensions she went in, and timidly asked if they would buy a ring.

She was coldly informed that they did not deal in second-hand jewellery, and directed her to a shop in a little street not far off. It was a mean dirty-looking little place, and she was half afraid to enter it. She did so at last, and producing her ring, stated her desire to dispose of it.

The unwashed Hebrew, who looked at it in a contemptuous manner, tossed it on

the counter, and said he would advance ten shillings on it.

“Oh no, it’s worth a great deal more than that,” she cried, almost with tears in her eyes. “I want three pounds at least for it.”

“Then you won’t get it here,” the gentleman remarked; “give yer a sovereign for it.”

“No, that won’t do,” said Joyce, and taking up her precious relic, she left the shop.

“What shall I do if I can’t sell it?” she thought to herself. “I can’t let it go for that. Oh dear, what am I to do?”

She looked about her for the name of the street into which she had come out from the little back lane where the shop was. It was Fenchurch Street. This was where the agents for some of the New York steamers had offices. She found the right number,

and then went in. A great many people were pushing and jostling each other in the passages and on the stairs, and a great deal of business of several different sorts seemed to be going on. She found the clerk she wanted at last, and asked him when the next steamer for New York sailed from London.

“Ours was off this morning, miss; the next one of ours goes this day week. Want a passage?”

“Not until this day week!” exclaimed Joyce; “why I thought they went nearly every day.”

“Ours only go once a week, others mostly go from Liverpool or Southampton. What for you, sir?” said the bustling clerk, turning to a new arrival.

Joyce felt quite crushed.

“Would it be any use if I went to the docks?” she asked, timidly.

"Can't say at all," replied the clerk.

It was useless to question him any further; he was evidently only concerned about his own line of steamers, and Joyce left the office, feeling very dispirited.

She had not the least idea where the steamers started from. She supposed the docks must be the place, and so bent her steps in that direction. London docks looked the biggest on the map, so she thought she would go there first. She was very cold and very tired; there was a sick dizzy feeling about her head that she supposed must be owing to the masses of thick yellow fog that spread along the streets from the river. It choked her and made her eyes smart and her throat sting. It seriously impeded her progress, for it was rapidly becoming too dark to read the names of the streets, or to see where she was going. It came like a great dark pall over the city

almost suddenly, and filled up every nook and crevice, and blotted out all semblance of sky or daylight. In an hour it was almost as dark as in the middle of the night, and Joyce had not the slightest idea where she was. She only knew that it was in some very low and filthy neighbourhood, for the pavements were covered with a mass of refuse, and horrid smells issued from the open doors. Babies and ragged children swarmed upon the steps, and slid into the road, and it required a good deal of careful walking to steer clear of such obstacles. She met burly forms of men, often reeling with drink, that loomed down upon her and lurched away into the gloom. Tattered women with shrieking voices, or heavy and stupid with drink or famine, passed her too, or leant against the steps of their houses, or showed at the broken lower windows. It was a squalid hideous



place, rendered terrible by the denseness of the fog.

Joyce never felt more frightened in her life than she did as she picked her way down the foul lane in the hope of reaching something better at the other end. What was her alarm to find that she was in a *cul-de-sac*! There was no way out that she could find; nothing could be done but to retrace her steps.

She stood in mute terror, not knowing what to do. There were sounds of oaths and curses up the street. Then a shriek rose awfully into the muffled air, and rang among the house-tops. Somebody must be being murdered. There was a sound of scuffling and more curses, and then another of those awful shrieks. They were coming nearer—they would be down upon her soon. They would murder her as they were murdering that other wretched creature.

The Sister looked back with a smile.

"Do not fear for me," she said ; "they all know me here," and in a moment she was out of sight.

She was back again before Joyce had had time to realise her situation.

"It is only a drunken scuffle," she said ; "nobody is hurt."

"*Only* a drunken scuffle," said Joyce, looking at her with tearful eyes.

"It sounds dreadful to have to speak of such things in that way, no doubt," said the Sister calmly ; "but when one knows what *does* happen in these courts, I can assure you that to find that it is only a husband and wife drinking together, and quarrelling on the way home, is rather a relief than otherwise ; it might have been so very much worse. But how did you come here ?" she asked, regarding Joyce intently.

"I lost my way in the fog. I was going

to the docks to see when a steamer sailed," replied Joyce, her eyes filling with tears again, "and now I can't stand ; oh, what shall I do?"

"Tell me all about it," said the Sister kindly. "Have you friends in London?"

"No, not one in the world," sobbed Joyce. "I have nobody at all! no place to go to!"

"Poor child!" said the Sister, passing her hand soothingly over the girl's tumbled hair—her hat had come off in her fall.

She stood thinking a few moments while Joyce sobbed on. Some people looked out from their doors on the landing, but seeing the Sister on the stairs, went back again quietly. The place was intolerably dirty and close, and the fog drifted in at the open door, bearing with it no very choice selection of sounds or smells.

"Will you come with me?" said the

clergymen came down the steps and proceeded to Dean's Yard.

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Sister ; “ your foot wants attending to, and you must have rest and shelter, poor child !” and the caressing hand moved over her hair again.

“ Oh, take me with you !” Joyce cried, eagerly clutching the Sister’s gown with her hands ; “ oh, take me anywhere with you out of this awful place !”

“ You must lean on me, then. Do you think you can manage to get downstairs if I help you so ?”

Joyce would have conquered any pain to abide with her new friend. She clung to her like a child when they were out in the foul street again, and went through the sights and sounds that were so dreadful to her.

“ We do not live very far off,” the Sister said encouragingly ; “ we must live close to our work, you know. You are keeping up bravely. What is your name ?”

Joyce lifted her eyes to the Sister's face. She was a tall woman, far taller than Joyce, with a serious worn face, that must have been very beautiful when young. Joyce had not noticed her face before in the gloom of the house ; now, as they passed by a gas lamp, she saw it distinctly, and strange to say, the sight of it sent a thrill through her heart. In some mysterious way she felt that she had recognised it. It was as if it were a recollection of a face that she had once known well. Was it possible that she had ever seen this woman before ? Briefly recalling her past life to herself, Joyce said that it was not possible, and she looked again.

This time the Sister caught her glance, and to Joyce's surprise, an instant thrill of agitation passed into her eyes. She, too, seemed struck by some haunting recollection of Joyce's face. For a moment her

eyes dilated, and even a tinge of colour came to her worn cheeks.

"What is your name, child?" she repeated again, in tones that trembled a little.

"Joyce Hyde," said the girl, looking up at her. She felt that this was a woman to be trusted.

A sudden flushing of the Sister's face, a quick drawing of her breath as if she had been terrified, a sudden tightening of her clasp of Joyce, startled the girl. In her amazement at the change in the placid Sister, Joyce forgot her accident, and put her sprained foot upon the ground. In an instant she had fallen faint and helpless, and her companion had her in her arms and was carrying her in at a clean-looking house, the door of which was opened by another Sister just as they came to it.

“ Sister Magdalen, what has happened ?” cried the stout little rosy-faced portress.

“ A girl has sprained her foot, and been frightened,” said Sister Magdalen, laying Joyce on a sofa in a room she went into, the stout little Sister following.

“ But Sister, what has happened to yourself ? You look agitated ; those Paradise Lane people have not been making a row and mobbing you, have they ?”

“ No, no ; help me with this child ; run and see if the doctor is in the infirmary,” said Sister Magdalen, unfastening Joyce’s ulster and dress.

The little portress trotted off down the hall, jingling her keys as she went.

“ I will send Sister Emily Mary to you,” she said, as she left.

Joyce soon recovered, and looked about her.

“ Where am I ?” she asked.

"In St. Mildred's Sisterhood her conductor. "Don't try and sit up. The doctor will be here and will bandage your foot presently. "I don't think it is badly hurt," she added, drawing the boot and stocking gently off; "but you must not walk for a few days."

"Oh, I must—I must!" cried Joyce, her face piteous with despair and appeal. "I have no money to stay in England—I must go!" and the sobs and faintness came on again.

"You are *not* to talk now," said the Sister firmly. "I am going to put you in my bed. Our infirmary is full—unfortunately it always is—but you must have a good rest, and your foot must be bandaged, and you shall talk afterwards."

The doctor and two Sisters from the infirmary came in now, and between them they carried Joyce upstairs, and laid her in

a little bed in a tiny cell-like room, whose only ornaments were a crucifix and one or two books.

She was very glad to rest, poor child ; and more thankful than words could tell to be safely housed and tended once more.

As Sister Magdalen bent over her to tuck the clothes about her after the others were gone, the girl put her arms about her neck and kissed her.

“ I have seen you somewhere before,” she said dreamily, for she was already half asleep. “ I know you quite well.”

The Sister made no answer, but smoothed her hot forehead and smiled. It was a sad, troubled smile ; and it haunted Joyce’s dreams, and got mixed up in them with the despairing longing of Austin Leybourne’s eyes as he had last looked in hers.

The Sister stood by her until she slept ; then she softly put the waving, tangled hair

back from her brow, and looked long and earnestly at her face.

“So very like,” she said to herself; “so impetuous and so true, so hasty and so honourable. She must be as like him in character as she is in face. Julius Hyde’s child—how shall I ever tell her!” and stooping down, the Sister touched the sleeping girl’s hand with her lips timidly, as though she felt herself unworthy of the contact; and her eyes were blinded with tears as she went from the room to the round of her daily work.





CHAPTER IX.

JOYCE remained at the Sisterhood several days. She did not stay in bed, but was obliged to keep lying down on account of her foot. The kindly nurses had offered to carry her in the mornings into another room where she would see more life and action, but Joyce had thanked them and begged to be allowed to remain where she was.

Sister Magdalen had given up the little room entirely to her use. Joyce did not see as much of her as she had hoped. She came every morning to ask her how she was, and brought her a book to amuse her ; and

every evening, when she
rounds, she saw her again for a
moments; but that was all. The Sisters
who took care of her and brought her her
meals were those from the infirmary—Sister
Rebecca and Sister Ruth—two strong,
pleasant, kindly women; not exactly ladies,
but gentle and refined in their ways and
expressions. Joyce asked them about her
first friend. She was one of the Sisters
Superior, they told her. It was expected
that she would be the Mother Superior next
year. They were all very fond of her, but
she was very strict in her life, the most
austere among them all. She was out all
day among the poor, and the amount of
good she did was incalculable. She had
been mobbed on two occasions by an
organised band of roughs. They were
proud to speak of this as a tribute to the
and efficacy of her work.

“Why does she always look so sad?”
Joyce asked.

The Sisters looked at one another.

“We do not know,” Sister Rebecca said;
“we all believe that she had some very
great trouble before she came to us, but
we do not know what it was. We only
know that she was a lady of good family,
and that she was very beautiful.”

“She is that now,” said Joyce warmly;
“she has a lovely face.”

This little conversation was enough to
give Joyce a keener interest still in her
new friend. She watched her curiously
when she came in that evening, and
wondered, with a girlish love of the
romantic, what that great trouble could
have been that had come to her in her
youth.

Sister Magdalen stayed longer this even-
ing. She seemed tired with her day's work,

and dispirited and sad as down beside Joyce and listened to the gentle talk about the book she had been reading, and the doctor's report, and various little incidents of the day. Rest and quiet were restoring Joyce to her old brightness of manner again. But the Sister's sadness did not wear off, and Joyce in her turn became silent and grave too. She sat watching her friend as she saw the lines of her profile clear and sharp against the little window; the head was drooping under the heavy black and white draperies that fell upon the shoulders, and the sad eyes were fixed on the little square of smoke-laden sky in the distance.

Suddenly Joyce uttered an exclamation, and then caught her breath.

"What is it?" said the Sister.

"I know now why I thought I had seen you before," the girl answered, while a hot

flush passed over her face. "You are like some one I know."

"Who is it?"

"I wouldn't tell you for worlds," answered Joyce, trying to hide her shamefacedness among the pillows; "don't ask me, please."

There was a long pause; at last the Sister said:

"I have never asked you yet how you came to be here in London friendless and alone; it is because I feel that I ought to tell you something first, you being, as I feel sure you are, the daughter of Julius Hyde of Moulbury."

"What! did you know my father?" cried Joyce, raising herself up in her excitement, and with her eyes flashing. "Oh, why didn't you tell me so before? if you only knew what it was even to hear his name again!" she added almost reproachfully.

"He is dead then?"
gently.

"He died last spring," said Joyce, with a sob. "Oh, we had been so happy! Father! father!"

"Tell me about him," said the Sister, taking her hand with tenderness, and then suddenly dropping it again.

Joyce spoke eagerly enough of her life in California up to the time of his death; she did not mention what had happened to her since then.

The Sister listened attentively, anxiously it seemed to Joyce. At the mention of his wife a quick flush passed over her face.

"You are sure that he was happy, and happy?" she asked, in a trembling voice, "that he did not regret leaving his country, and friends?"

"He didn't when I knew him," said Joyce. "What he did at first

guess he wasn't very happy until he met
his mother ; but nobody ever was so happy
as he was then, so he told me."

"And he really loved her and was
happy?"

"I should just think he did," replied
Joyce. "Why he was quite glad to die
because he thought he should see her
again. Expect if it hadn't been for me he
would have given over long ago ; but he
didn't wait on till I was big enough to
look after myself, you see, and then quietly
died. I believe he could have done it any
time with longing if he had let himself. He
was happy with her!"

"Thank God !" said the Sister, bending
her head.

She sat very quiet for some moments,
her hands clasped in her lap, and her
face bent over them. Joyce feared to
disturb her, she seemed so absorbed in

inward thought. It was getting dark in the little room, a feeble flicker of gas-light from the street struggled through the window, and fell upon the Sister's pale face, and brightened into startling contrast the black and white of her costume. There was no sound in the house with its many stone passages and echoing stairs. The little orphans and the Sisters and nurses were having their tea in the distant refectory, and the hour for visitors and outside helpers was past.

Joyce wondered how long the Sister was going to sit in that drooping thoughtless manner; she fancied once or twice that a shade of hesitation crossed her face, and she seemed going through some deep inward struggle. At last she spoke:

"Did your father, Julius Hyde, ever tell you the reason why he left England for ever?" She spoke with some difficulty.

“No, he never did,” said Joyce hotly, her eyes flashing and her face burning. “Why should he repeat a shameful lie to me?”

The Sister looked at her quickly.

“You call it so. Have you ever heard?” she asked.

“I was told what people say,” said Joyce, the burning tears in her eyes; ‘that’s all I know, except that I know it’s a false, shameful, wicked lie!’”

“You are right,” said the Sister. “It *is* a lie, if they say now what they said twenty years ago in Moulbury. Great God, I hoped it had been forgotten!” and the Sister’s head drooped again. She pulled her black veil about her face, as though ashamed for Joyce to look at it.

“You! how do you know?” asked Joyce in amazement.

“Because I am Aspasia Leybourne,” said the Sister.

"You! Oh, I know you now!" cried Joyce excitedly, leaning forward to clasp the Sister's hand. "You are Austin Leybourne's aunt;" and for a moment she clung to her with new-found love. But the next moment she lay back upon her bed again, and hid her face among the pillows, turning herself as far as she could from the woman beside her.

"I understand," the Sister said gently. "You despise the woman who let your father suffer a lifelong shame for her sake. It is right and natural that you should. You can never despise her as she does herself. But will you listen to what I have to say? God knows I never thought after all these years to tell this tale again to any living creature."

The patient sadness of the voice went to Joyce's heart; she turned again, and pulling her hair back from her face, said:

“ Yes, tell me.”

“ I suppose you know,” said the Sister, speaking in very low tones, and with her face still hidden by her drooping veil, “ that Julius Hyde and my brother Claude were great friends. Yes, you would have heard all that ; but whatever you heard you could never hear enough of Julius Hyde’s joyfulness and kindness, and tenderness to every created thing. There never was a man more manly, and more tender. He was as much a brother to me as Claude was—I hardly knew any difference between them in that respect. One was as ready in my school-days to rub out my wrong sum and do it right for me as the other ; one as ready to take me riding, or walking, or boating, as the other. I need not tell you that I never looked upon him as a lover, never dreamt of him as such ; while I am sure any such thought was



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equally far from him. I was his little sister—
—he always called me so, and I believe
loved me as one.”

The Sister paused. Joyce could not
break the silence.

“There was a regiment stationed at
Moulbury,” she went on. “Julius, who was
in the army, knew all the officers, of course;
so did my brother. Some of them often came
to Sheré Court—one of them in particular.
I need not tell you his name—it has gone
before his God long ago. He was a great
friend of Julius and Claude, formed a third
in all their plans and pleasures. I can’t
describe him to you even now, and it is not
necessary to do so. We loved each other
—I need scarcely tell you that. After a
time he came less openly to our house. I
was too young to wonder at that, for I met
him secretly in the marshes, and among the
woods outside Moulbury. I was young

I silly enough to like the romantic element thus introduced into what might have been a straightforward courtship enough. Might have been, if he were the man I took him to be.

"At last the regiment was ordered from Southbury. I was disconsolate, of course. He wrote to me then. His regiment was ordered to India, he said ; would I join him in London, get married there, and go out with him ? No time was to be lost. He suggested that it would be better to tell my friends afterwards, or they might prevent me a hasty unceremonious marriage. That, of course, was enough for me. I went home, fondly imagining the delightful triumph with which I would return to it in, a new-made bride, for a brief leave-taking.

"There was no marriage. I won't repeat to you the evasions, the skilful pleadings,

the force of circumstances, not even plead my youth and inexperience, and my trust in *him*. I was bewildered, stupefied, madly in love with him, and that was all.

“ In a few weeks I was alone. He left me in a lodging he had procured for me, where I was expecting his return every moment. He was on the seas when I got his letter. I never could tell you, if I tried, what the next few weeks were to me. I could not go home. I had no money. I was driven reckless, in charity let me say mad. Don’t ask me, child, what I did for those next awful months.

“ I was rescued at last ; was nursed, and tended, and saved. It was not till years after that I heard what was said of your father. I was a Sister then, helping to rescue women from degradation. It was a good work, and a thriving work under my hands. Wretch as I was, I could help those who were more

wretched. I could not abandon my work upon which God Himself seemed showering special blessings, to go down to my old home and proclaim aloud my sin. It was more than I could do. I learnt that they believed me dead; that Julius Hyde had disappeared, it was believed in America; that no one, not even his own family, knew where he was. It seemed a useless thing to go and cry aloud my disgrace when he whom it most affected might never hear it. They mercifully believed me dead. It would be useless cruelty to show them what I had been. My brother, too, the one next to your father most interested in the matter, was dead. It cost me years of tearful nights that he should have gone down to his grave believing in his dearest friend's dishonour. It seemed to me that God had taken my old life out of my hands and given me His work to do. I had best

leave it in His hands and press forward, never looking back. I did so to the best of my ability ; and now you, his child, come to me out of another world, as it were, and look at me with his eyes, and tell me that the burden of his shame has fallen upon you."

There was the sound of quiet weeping behind the thick black veil. Joyce could bear it no longer.

"Oh, let me come to you!" she cried amidst her tears. "He knows it all now, and it will grieve him where he is to see you weep such bitter tears. Dear Sister, take me in your arms ; think no more of that dreadful past, only of how happy he is now ;" and Joyce flung her arms round the sobbing woman's neck.

"God bless you!" she cried, laying her head on the girl's bosom ; "you are his daughter indeed. I know he would have

forgiven me had I done him ten times the injury, if it were possible ; let me hear his forgiveness from you."

" Oh, my poor dear," said Joyce, raining down kisses on the agonised forehead, " forgive you ! he never did anything else ! Don't ever think of it again."

" I must—I must do that," the Sister said ; " the justice I have tried to escape must be done at last. Joyce, tell me, do people still talk of him ?"

Joyce hesitated.

" Not much," she said, " only one spiteful old woman did that ever I heard ; but I am afraid they all believe it of him."

" They must be told, they must be told," cried the Sister, lifting her face again. " Oh, Joyce, will you tell them—his brother—my sister-in-law ? I am so miserably weak, I cannot even now face them again !"

"I am never going back there again," said Joyce. "I can't tell you, please ; but I can't go back again. But I will write," she added, seeing the Sister's look of wonder. "I can't tell you everything," she went on—"at least, not now. There is nothing wrong to keep me away, but—but I can't see two people there again. I am going to America ; I will write to you from there."

"I cannot let you do so," said the Sister ; "you must go back to your friends. Think of me, child ; go back to your home."

"It is not my home," said Joyce ; "my home is in America."

She would say no more of herself, and the Sister ceased to press her. She only knelt beside the bed with her head on the girl's breast, as though at last she had found peace. She knelt there so long that Joyce thought she must be asleep. She touched her face at last. It was very cold.

‘Sister Magdalen,” she said in a frightened whisper, “are you asleep?”

The Sister moved her lips a little, as Joyce could feel, but no sound came from them. She grew alarmed, and tried to rouse her. That failing, she endeavoured to raise her up. The head fell heavily down again, and lay where it fell on her shoulder. Thoroughly frightened, Joyce pulled her to the bell, and presently a Sister came crying in, in answer to the summons.

‘What is the matter?” she cried; then, seeing Sister Magdalen, she lifted her face, and gave one startled glance at it, and rushed on to the corridor.

In a few moments the Mother Superior and several of the Sisters came in. They lifted the unconscious form tenderly and bore it out; and Joyce heard rapid directions given for the doctor to be sent for. She begged and implored one of the

Sisters to bring her news, and was even getting up herself to follow her poor friend when Sister Ruth held her back.

"You shall be told everything," she said. "Do not add to our distress and confusion now."

Joyce lay back again as patiently as she could. The minutes seemed very long before she heard the doctor's step come along the corridor and enter the next room. They seemed hours before she heard him go away again, and longer still before Sister Ruth came back to her room.

"Oh, tell me what is the matter with her!" cried Joyce in an agony of waiting.

The Sister was sobbing so that she could scarcely speak.

"She is gone to her Eternal Bridegroom," she said at last.

And Joyce turned with a bitter cry her face to the wall, and wept.



CHAPTER X.

THERE was noise and bustle and confusion on board the steamer *Waterloo*, bound from London to New York. Throngs of people were arriving every moment and distractedly placing bags and bundles and small boxes in everybody's way, and more distractedly clamouring for their berths and luggage, cab-drivers, porters, members of their family, and friends. The great deck of the ship was covered with struggling human figures, and a multitude of small baggage. Downstairs in the fore part of the ship it was still worse. All the steerage passengers

were taking possession of their few feet of space, and most of them trying to encroach on their neighbours' as well. There was much laughing, talking, crying, eating and drinking, and leave-taking, for the vessel was to sail in a few hours.

Most of the people in this confined space were of the servant and mechanic class, with a few farm-labourers, and a smaller sprinkling of reduced tradespeople. There were one or two forlorn wretched-looking creatures, men for the most part, who might have seen better days, and belonged to a different state of society to that in which they now found themselves. There was one tall young man standing by the doorway of the principal room who certainly belonged to this class, only he looked neither forlorn nor wretched. On the contrary, his face was bright and hopeful, and he evidently anticipated a good time for the

future. He was roughly dressed in a new suit of thick tweed, and held himself with the action of a man who has new clothes on, and a new world before him. He was talking to a gentleman beside him, evidently not one of the passengers, a tall thin man with a grave melancholy face, and a long brown moustache.

“You are sure you have everything now, Bob?” he asked; “nothing forgotten, is here?”

“Everything as jolly and right as possible,” rejoined Bob heartily, “and a precious lot of thanks to you, Leybourne. What should I have done without you?”

“Nonsense!”

“No, it isn’t nonsense. If it hadn’t been for you, neither of the governors would ever have consented to give us the start they have. I should have had no help, no money beyond my bare passage, and neither Nan

nor I would have had the faintest idea what sort of rig to take, even if we had the money for it. You have done everything for us, Leybourne."

"Old Badcock has behaved very well," said Austin.

"Like a brick," responded the son-in-law; "he was mad as a March hare at first, as you very well know. I must say, now I come to think of it, it was rough on him for Nanny to be cut off from him for a worthless fellow like me. He never would have come round if you had not seen him. He is a proud old bird; but thanks to you, he has given us five hundred pounds to start in America. If I don't turn out a rich man I am a greater fool than I think I am."

"Well, I wish I could have got your father to let you go anywhere but steerage," said Austin, looking about him. "This

sn't a pretty place to be in for some lays."

"Well, no, it is not," said Bob cheerfully; "but there, what does it matter? The governor thought it would be a good punishment for me; and really you know it is very sensible, for we have got to begin at the bottom of the tree, and we can't begin too early. Old Badcock doesn't pay us the five hundred till we get to America; I suppose he was afraid we might stop in England and waste it if he did. I don't mind steerage a bit, and I am sure Nan doesn't."

"She is a brave girl," said Austin Leybourne, a little absently. •

"You may say that," said her husband admiringly. "Why, if it wasn't for that girl's pluck, I should never be here now. She may be rough, but she is genuine is Nan; and what am I but rough myself?"

We are cut out for colonists, both of us."

"Truly, I think you are," said Austin, smiling, as Nanny's plump little figure came in sight. She was looking very bright and happy, and her neat dress of rough dark blue serge set off her round form and rosy face to advantage.

"Oh, Bob dear!" she exclaimed, "we have the tiniest dear little box of a room all to ourselves—the snuggest little place: do come and look!"

Her bright face and happy tones had a pleasant effect upon the dark grave man.

"May I come and look too?" he asked. "Mrs. Hyde, you are sure to make a snug little place for Bob wherever you go."

The courtesy of his words and manner pleased the farmer's little daughter. She was never reminded of the difference of her position from that of her husband by

Austin Leybourne, and she liked him accordingly, though she was shy of him.

"Yes, do come," she said, leading the way through a labyrinth of luggage and passengers in all stages of confusion.

Suddenly Bob stopped. Outside a door leading to one of the sleeping-rooms there was a pile of luggage on the floor. There was a very shabby battered old gun-case upon it. Bob seized Austin's arm.

"Look there!" he cried; "do you see that?"

"See what?" asked Austin, looking about him for some appearance out of the common, and not seeing it.

"Why, there, that gun-case! It's Joyce's," cried Bob, in great excitement.

Austin snatched it up. His face grew deadly white and his lips quivered as he did so.

"Are you sure? Do you know it?" he asked, nervously examining it.

"Should know it in a hundred," said Bob, looking it carefully all over; "she brought it all the way from San Francisco, and it was hung up in her room. She took it with her when she left. Dear little Joyce! is it possible——"

"Don't," said the elder man, as though in terror at hearing the words Bob was going to utter. "Oh, Bob, if it's not hers after all!" and great drops stood on Austin's forehead.

"It is—it is hers!" cried Bob. "I'd swear to it among a thousand! It must be hers; and she would never part with it. Dear little Joyce!" and Bob's voice grew hoarse. "Don't take on so, Leybourne," he added, after a particularly noisy cough had subsided; "she must be here."

"I can't bear it if she is not," the other

said hastily—"just as I had given up all hope. I don't believe there is a street in London I have not been in, or a policeman I have not spoken to, or an hotel I have not been at ; and as for furnished lodgings, I have been into thousands, and no trace of her anywhere ; and now to come upon this !"

" Let's get out of here," said Bob suddenly. " If she sees us she may make off, and then there would be no finding her. Let's get in here and watch. She is sure to come back soon."

Still holding the precious case, Austin followed him into one of the other rooms, whence they could command a view of the doorway where the relic had been found. They had not to wait very long ; a slim, girlish little figure came flying along, and then stopped before the pile of baggage, and began overhauling it rapidly.

"Oh, where is it?" she cried aloud in her distress. "I know I left it here!"

Bob, with a sudden insight into the mysteries of human nature, pushed Austin Leybourne outside the door into the narrow little passage, and seizing Nanny by the arm, triumphantly walked off.

Joyce, hearing some one behind her, looked round, then gave a little cry, and staggered back against the door. Her very soul seemed to leap into her eyes with the glow that rushed over her face.

In an instant Austin was at her side, his arm round her, and his lips upon her forehead.

"My darling!" was all he said; but it was quite enough, and he felt her tremble as her face hid itself on his shoulder.

It was a strange place for such a meeting and such an embrace; but a good deal of that sort of thing was going on in corners



all over the *Waterloo* just then, so nobody thought anything of seeing these two people in a lover-like attitude in a quiet, or comparatively quiet, corner, where not more than ten people passed in the course of a minute. As for the lovers, they naturally did not think of anybody or anything but themselves. Joyce, of course, began to cry after a few moments, as she always did when she was violently agitated; and Austin never enjoyed himself so much in his life as he did while he wiped her tears away and soothed her trembling excitement.

The sense of propriety, always stronger in the woman than in the man, came to Joyce naturally as soon as her tears ceased to flow. Drawing herself out of his arms, with the old saucy look in her sweet eyes, she said :

“ You are wasting my time awfully. I

shall not have a bit of room for my luggage if I don't hurry up. Oh, it was you who stole my gun-case, was it? Give it me, please."

"This shall never go out of my possession any more," said Austin, looking down upon her with eyes so full of love and admiration that she cast hers down directly. "It shall be an heirloom in my family for ever."

"And pray what am I to do without it?" she cried in mock piteous appeal, spreading her little hands out supplicatingly.

"You will be good enough to consider the two identical," he said, making her a low bow. Then drawing her hand in his arm, he said: "Shall we go and inform Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hyde of our reconciliation?"

"Reconciliation!" she repeated. "Why, we never quarrelled!"

"Oh yes, we did," he answered com-

posedly. "We quarrelled dreadfully when Ethelred Ashton made love to you. I quarrelled horribly with you for liking him best, I can assure you. I very nearly went into my observatory and solemnly consumed on a funeral-pile the whole of my valuable manuscripts, I was so disappointed at the one woman in the world for me giving her invaluable assistance to Ethelred's dogs and horses instead of to my stupendous discoveries. You don't know what a blight science has suffered since your disappearance."

"But you didn't burn them, did you?" she asked, with some alarm in her tones.

"No, little friend—I shall always call you that, you know; you were that before little wife—I didn't do it, because of what my little friend had been to me. I couldn't quite forget our talks, though I tried very

hard to do so;" and he looked tenderly down at her.

They had quite forgotten all about Bob, of course; but that young gentleman being consumed with anxiety to know what was going on, came upon them at this moment.

"Hallo, Joyce!" he said, while she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him; "who would have thought of seeing you here, old girl? And jolly glad I am," he added, squeezing her affectionately.

"Why, who would have thought of seeing *you* here?" cried Joyce, releasing him at last. "Oh, Bob, I do declare you have grown! Why, you are quite a man!"

Bob grinned, and looked sheepishly at his new clothes, while his hand stole up to a very promising moustache-bud on his lip.

"It's the rig," he said modestly.

"You look quite rough and nice," said

Joyce admiringly ; “ you are not a bit like a boy. Oh, Bob, are you going abroad ?”

“ ‘Frisco,” said Bob. “ I haven’t forgotten what you told me about that locality, Joyce.”

“ Oh, why, I am going !” she began, and then stopped suddenly, while a crimson colour flashed over her face.

“ Certainly, my love, if you wish,” said Austin composedly. “ I have no doubt I can manage to stow away. The penalty is not very heavy, I believe.”

Bob burst into a roar of laughter.

“ Why, where’s Nan ?” he cried, when he had partially recovered. “ Nan, my girl, come along. Joyce, this is Mrs. Robert Hyde. Ha, ha, ha !” and Robert roared again.

“ Why, Nanny !” exclaimed Joyce, stepping forward and taking the girl’s hand and kissing her ; “ why, it is you who

have turned Bob into a man, of course. How stupid of me not to guess it at once!"

The embrace and the kind words went straight to Nanny's heart. She gave a brief hug to Joyce, and then, to everyone's astonishment, for Nanny was not a girl given to crying, she burst into a flood of tears.

"Why, Nan, old girl," said Bob tenderly, drawing her towards him, "don't knock under like this. It's your kissing her," he whispered to Joyce. "You see my people have never seen her, or as much as written a line to her since we have been married. She feels it, you see."

Joyce's arms were around the weeping girl in an instant. She drew her aside into a corner where some seats were, and sat down beside her.

"Don't, Nanny dear," she said; "don't let me leave you crying. You have done

so much good to Bob already, you mustn't let me go away thinking you are going to fail him now."

"Oh, Miss Joyce," the girl cried, looking up.

"Joyce," said the other, correcting her. "We are cousins now."

"Joyce," said Nanny obediently, "you don't know how often I'm feared I have been the ruin of him. Oh, you don't know what the Archdeacon and Mrs. Hyde said. They took on as if—as if," added Nanny tearfully, "I was a disgrace to him."

Joyce kissed her again.

"I think you are very nice, and just the right sort of wife for him," she said, with her little decisive manner. "You will just have a *lovely* time out in the West."

"Come, you two," said Bob, coming up to them, "no crying in corners, if you please. This is a regular jolly day all

round. Joyce, my darling, I should like to have had your company out ; but on the whole, I think I would rather leave you in Leybourne's hands. He says if you are still of a mind for the far West he will bring you out to see us, after—*after* you are married, you little dear ! so here goes for regular slap-up jollity all round !" and with a sounding kiss on Joyce's lips, Bob bestowed a very warm cousinly hug upon her.

"There goes the visitors' bell," said Austin. "Joy, my precious, you must say good-bye to your cousins now ; it need not be for long, mind. I will keep my promise about your going to see them whenever you like. Where is that never-sufficiently - to - be - valued-and-altogether-estimable gun-case ? Now, my darling !"

There were more tears and kisses and good-byes, of course, and Bob and

Nanny came up on deck to see them go ashore.

The emigrants had all crowded to the side of the ship to take a last farewell of the friends they were leaving.

"There they are!" cried Joyce, catching hold of Austin's sleeve. "Oh, Austin, to think that I might have been in her, going away for ever from you now!"

"But for that everlastingly precious gun-case," said Austin, "so you might."





CHAPTER XI.

HOYCE stood clinging to Austin's arm as they watched the great steamer move slowly down the docks. There was a crowd and bustle about them, and much pushing and jostling by their neighbours, some anxious to get a last sight of the emigrant ship, others only eager to get away.

"Shall we move on?" Austin said after a little while.

She started and looked up at him.

"I had not thought where we were to go," she said.

"You need never worry about that or

anything else for the future," he said, pressing her arm; "I am going to do all that sort of thing for you. Just now I think you had better have something to eat; there will be time for some dinner before the last train from Charing Cross."

"Charing Cross!" she repeated; "where are you going to take me?"

"Home, of course; to my mother's, or your uncle's, whichever you prefer."

"Oh, indeed I cannot go there!" she cried in great distress. "If we could get into a quiet place I could tell you. I cannot go there before they get my letter, and it was only posted this morning."

"Your letter! Have you been writing to them? Oh, child, child! why have you given us all such terrible trouble?"

It was his first and last rebuke to her, and it sank into her heart.

"I know it was wrong now," she said

with quivering lips: "but I did not think anybody would care much. I am very sorry."

He could not bear to see her look so grieved.

"It is over now, my precious!" he said. "Perhaps it had its good use in making us value you all the more. We did not really know what you were until you were gone. Your uncle and aunt seemed heart-broken. Do you know they dragged the dykes and rivers for miles round after you, you little mischief?"

"No, did they?" cried Joyce. "Why, I went over the stop-gate."

"And lost your hat there, and those poor dear foolish old Miss Sacketts found it, and brought it to the Rectory in a deluge of tears. Everybody believed you were drowned except Bob and I."

"And why didn't you?"

"Because," he said, looking earnestly down into her upturned face, "if I had believed it I should have drowned myself."

She gave a little shiver and clung closer to him.

"It's all right now," he said cheerfully, noticing how pale she suddenly became; 'we won't think of that ugly time any more. With a plentiful use of hair-dye we shall be able to deceive my mother, and nobody else will care if my luxuriant locks are dark or grey. Oh, child, you have a great deal to answer for! Now let us get into a cab and go and have some dinner."

It was a long drive from the docks to the Strand, and the scenery was not beautiful through which they passed, even if the drizzling rain and wandering fog had allowed it to be seen. But it might have been through Paradise itself as far as the

two in the hansom were concerned. They did not speak much—the streets were too noisy to allow of conversation being pleasant—but they could hold each other's hands, and that was bliss eternal, according to their ideas; so when they stopped at Simpson's, and Austin ordered a private room, it seemed but a moment ago that they had left the docks.

A pretty little dinner was quickly served to them in a cheerful room overlooking the Strand. To Joyce, who had for some weeks been used to the plain and somewhat meagre fare of the Sisterhood, the meal seemed a splendid feast. Being blessed with a good healthy appetite, she enjoyed her dinner very much. It was the first tangible hold she had been able to take of her new life. Everything had changed suddenly for her. From being a lonely waif upon the waves of a troublesome world, homeless, friendless, and poor, with a great



ging aching void in her heart that med impossible to be filled, here she s suddenly transported into a state of tenth-heavenly bliss. Austin loved her, l loved her all this time ; had rescued · from the misery of all the dim dreadful ure, and the wretched present. Austin s to be her husband, was indeed so now heart, and she would never be separated m him any more. To say that the child s bewildered and excited would give ; a faint idea of her real state of mind. e had that peculiar deep shining in her s that is rarely seen in any but a new-de bride's ; a sort of shy consciousness of ring found out the world's great secret, l that it has turned to untold bliss for : “ Married this mornin', hup from the ntry,” had been the waiter's soliloquy as ushered them in ; and he gave them the t room at his disposal, and the choicest hes accordingly.

Austin, for his part, was scarcely less moved than Joyce. It seemed impossible to believe that he had really found her, and that she had come back as it were from the dead to be his wife. He had never known what life could be to him until he sat there alone with her in that dining-room over the noisy Strand.

They had not been able to talk much during the dinner; the constant attentions of the waiter prevented that. The careful manner in which that discreet individual always made a noise outside the door before entering amused Austin very much. It was so very clear what the man's opinion of them was. After he had placed some dessert upon the table and withdrawn for good, Austin said :

"Joy darling, do you see what that man thinks of us?"

"No," said Joyce, opening wide her

eyes ; “ what should he ? Isn’t it the proper thing for people to dine here ? ”

“ Of course it is ; should I have brought you here otherwise ? But, little one, he thinks you are a new-made bride ; ” and he smiled as he said the words.

Joyce coloured, and then said with her old childish sauciness :

“ Appears to me you think so too.”

“ Of course I do,” he said. “ We were engaged—let me see, when was it ? the 12th of June ; that was the day you sat on the rail, in a blue Parisian costume, swinging your feet and crying, wasn’t it ? Well, the very first moment we looked at each other we became engaged. We did. We recognised the fact later on, of course ; but it was a fact. To-day is our wedding-day, owing to the instrumentality of a gifted gun-case. Joy, my precious, if you don’t say something to vex me very much,

I shall not be able to bear it, I am so happy."

"Oh, you needn't be so everlastingly rejoiced," she said gravely. "You don't know what a time you will have with me. I have a dreadful temper, and I know I shall be saucy to your mother. There, now I have vexed you!" she cried, as she saw a shade pass over his face.

"That is more than you can do, if you try all your life," he said, half-banteringly, half-seriously. "It is not possible for me to be vexed with you. But, I confess, my mother has got her prejudices."

"And I am one of them," said Joyce. "I know that. But, Austin dear, isn't that really rather on account of my father than myself. She can't dislike me *very* much from the little she has seen of me."

"I don't believe she dislikes *you* at all. It is, as you say, because she has some

wild notions about your father. Don't let us talk of it, darling."

"Oh, but I want to," cried Joyce, her face very eager. "Austin, do tell me you have not believed what they say about him! Do tell me that you have not!"

"My darling," he said, surprised at her eagerness and passionate utterance, "I never loved you so much as when I found you had the courage to fling that lie back on those who spread it. I never believed it for a moment."

Joyce rose and threw herself on her knees beside him, clasping him so close in her embrace that he was almost alarmed, fearing she was over-excited, or ill.

"Oh, why didn't I trust you before?" she cried. "Why didn't I come to you at first? I ought to have known that *you* would never have believed it. Oh, Austin, I have wronged you so; that has been the worst pain of all."

“My own dear little love,” he said, raising her, and holding her in his arms, “don’t talk in this wild way. You will make yourself ill.”

“I must, I must tell you,” she said, calmer in the protection of his arms, and lifting her clear eyes to his face. “Austin, I have found out all about it !”

“Never mind now,” he said, gently smoothing her hair with his hand. He fancied she was unnecessarily agitating herself. “We will talk of it some other time.”

“No, I must show you now,” she said. “Look at this letter,” tremblingly rising and unfastening the gun-case which lay upon a chair—“look at it. It is a letter to your Aunt Aspasia.”

“My Aunt Aspasia !” he cried. “Good heavens, child, she has been dead twenty years !”

“ She died a fortnight ago,” said Joyce, “died in my arms. Oh, Austin darling, you won’t think badly of her? It nearly kills me to remember how she suffered ;” and Joyce burst into a flood of tears on her lover’s breast.

He held her there very gently till the worst of her passionate sobbing was over.

“ Tell me about it, darling,” he said. “ I don’t understand.”

In broken words and sobs she told him all she knew. He looked very grave and serious, and was deeply stirred by the revelation of this long-silent history of shame.

“ Poor Aunt Aspasia !” he said at last, when Joyce had ceased. “ I remember her as the loveliest girl, no older than you, my Joy. We never heard a single word from her after she left us. I remember lying awake at night and crying for my

beautiful aunt and Julius Hyde. They used to hush me in a stern, sad way that I did not understand then. Poor Aspasia! Tell me how she looked, dear."

"Very sad, and worn, and lovely—very, very sad," said Joyce; "but peaceful and quiet. They told me wonderful things of her in the Sisterhood. She did more real good than all the rest put together."

They were both silent for a little while; then Austin said:

"How did you get this letter?"

"There were only one or two papers among her things," said Joyce. "After she was dead I asked the Mother if she would let me look over them. I told her I was a friend of her people's, and knew her real name. They none of them knew it. I was afraid there might be something to tell them about her, and so I begged to be allowed to look first. There was only this

letter, and one other about her life as a Sister. They took that ; but I showed them the beginning and end of this letter, and asked to be allowed to keep it, saying it was a secret connected with her family. The Mother was very kind, and let me keep it. I could not bear them to have known," Joyce added with tearful eyes, "anything that could have made them think lightly of her in her grave."

"That Mother was a good woman," said Austin ; "I will go and thank her."

"I think she suspected something," said Joyce, "for when she saw the signature, she sighed, and said, 'Ah yes, she was too beautiful and sweet not to have known the lot of women. Put it by safely, child ; I think I can trust you to deal tenderly with the old love-story of a saint ;' but she never read it."

"She is a good woman," said Austin

again. "What a heartless letter . . .
last she ever had, of course. Poor Aspasia!
Joyce dear, this must be shown to my
mother and your uncle. All whom it
intimately concerned are dead now. It is
a tardy justice to your father, but it has
come at last."

"Oh, Austin," said Joyce, lifting her face
to his, "do you think this will make any
difference to your mother?"

"All the difference," he replied. "She
will think that she can never do enough to
atone for her wrong judgment of your
father. She will try to make up for it by
kindness to you. People do not know how
just my mother is. She may have her
little fancies, but she is thoroughly true at
heart. You need not fear her any longer
now, dear."

They sat quite quiet for a little while,
holding each other's hands and thinking

of all that had come to them both. The noise of the great city around them beat upon their ears as the murmur of a world outside them, that toiled on its labouring way without ruffling their perfect peace within.

At last Austin spoke.

"We must go now," he said, "or we shall miss our train."

"Oh, must we go there?" she cried.
"How can I face them again!"

"Darling," he said very tenderly, "can you not trust me to do what is right for you? Do you think I would give you pain needlessly? But you know—we both know—that it is your duty not to keep your uncle and aunt one moment longer in suspense than we can help. They have had suffering enough on your account, child; all you can do now is to lessen it as much as possible."

“ But they will get my letter to-morrow,” she pleaded.

“ Yes, a letter telling them that even when you have discovered the truth about your father, you care so little for his dying wishes, and his brother’s goodness to you, that you are going to the other side of the world from them. Is not that so ?”

“ Yes,” said Joyce, hanging her head.

“ There is yet another reason,” he said, smiling. “ We don’t want to give occasion to the enemy—that is to say, to Mrs. Johnstone and her like—to blaspheme. What would she say if she knew, as she certainly would know, if I didn’t bring you back to your uncle directly ? My dear, the great Cæsar himself was not above the reach of scandalous tongues—how much more shall we be at their mercy ! I must own,” he added, seeing her still hesitate, “ that what I should like to do would be to take you



back to that good Mother's for the night, get a license in the morning, and be married down in Greenwich Old Church at once. I should like that so much that I can't trust myself to talk about it, because if we do I shall infallibly do it."

"Oh no, we will go," she said, jumping up and blushing scarlet.

"I perceive," he said gravely, "the question of bridesmaids has settled it. We couldn't possibly have bridesmaids to-morrow; and no properly constituted woman should ever consent to do her young lady friends out of a full-dress rehearsal of the ceremony they each hope to play prima donna in. Don't contradict me, child; I know you are at this moment thinking whether they shall wear blue or pink."

"Don't be so ridiculous!" said Joyce, tying on her hat.

"But it's true!" he persisted. Then, as he looked admiringly at her fair, smiling face, he said: "It's very hard to resign you into other hands just as I have found you."

"Now you are taking fright at the bridesmaids!" she rejoined, laughing. "You are basely longing to slink out of being eclipsed in public by me!"

"My Joy!" he said, looking fondly at her as he drew her hand in his arm.

"I wish you would always call me that," she whispered, as they went down the stairs together. "Nobody ever called me so but father."

"I couldn't call you anything else if I tried ever so hard," he answered. "You are the one great happiness of the world to me."

As they came out into the Strand the snow was falling lightly, making even the

filthy pavement and the black house-tops glistening and pure for a brief space.

"It will be terribly cold going over the marshes," Austin said, looking up at the full-laden sky. "There has been snow down there for the last week."

"How are we to get up from the station?" she asked.

"I telegraphed to Southton for a carriage when I went downstairs while dinner was getting ready ; but it's ten to one if they send it if there is much snow about. I hardly know now whether it is prudent to go down to-night."

"Oh, I can walk—it's only three miles!" cried Joyce. "Why, it will be only fun!"

True enough, when they got to the end of their railway journey no carriage was waiting for them. Indeed, they were the only passengers who got out at that station. All around, as far as the eye could see, lay

the great stretches of glimmering snow-covered marshes, ghostly in the moonlight, for here the sky was clear and blue, with innumerable stars twinkling in its frosty depths.

"It's the most glorious night!" cried Joyce, dancing down the slope to the river that flowed, black and silent, between its white banks. "We shall have the most heavenly walk!"

Austin laughed. It was the first time she had ever heard him give a real hearty laugh, such as a happy boy might give—he smiled often, but she had never heard him really laugh before—and its echoes fled away down the dark river and rang over the snowy plains.

"I like that," she said admiringly. "I never heard you laugh before. I didn't know you could!" she added mischievously.

"And did you think you were going to

be mated to the laughless man who lived in a moated grange, you poor little atom?" he said. "I feel just now as though I was never going to do anything but laugh and throw my hat up for ever!"

They went merrily along the white road between the hawthorn-bushes, now bending with their weight of snow. The crisp snow cracked under their feet, and the clear frosty air was keen and sharp.

"We must go by the road," Austin said. "We should certainly get lost going across-country. Besides, the dykes may not be safe to cross ; and they are so covered with snow, it is hard to tell dyke from road. This track is pretty plain, as carts have been to the station to-day ; otherwise we might be lost even here. I hope you will be able to manage the walk."

"Manage the walk !" cried Joyce, her little feet scarcely leaving any impression

on the snow, she tripped along so lightly. "I could walk twenty miles on such a night as this. I did go ten miles over snow in the Rockies with father one night, and that wasn't along a level road like this."

"I hope they won't be all gone to bed," said Austin. "It will be nearly twelve by the time we get to Charrington."

It was nearly twelve when they came in at the Rectory gates. Joyce had sobered a good deal during the last mile of her walk. It was rather formidable to meet her relations again, and she could scarcely believe Austin's assurance that they would be so glad to see her that they would never scold her. She was trembling when they came into the shadow of the porch and Austin pulled the bell.

The house was quite dark. No gleam of candle-light in any of the windows, only the moonlight on the blinded panes.

"They are all in bed," whispered Joyce.
"Oh, it will frighten them so!"

"I am afraid it will do that," Austin answered; "but there is nothing else to be done."

They listened intently; there was a noise on the stairs; some one was coming down. Then the sound of an agonised female voice was distinctly audible, though the two outside the door could not distinguish Mrs. Hyde's frantic entreaty to her husband not to go down, she was sure it was burglars.

"Tut, tut, nonsense!" said the Arch-deacon, descending the stairs in a cassock and shoes; "burglars don't ring bells."

"Oh, I am sure it is!" screamed Mrs. Hyde; "you will be killed, and we shall all be murdered in our beds. Laurence, don't —*don't* unfasten the door!"

"It's all right," shouted Austin from out-

side, guessing at the cause of
fright; "don't be alarmed!"

"Dear, dear, dear! bless my soul, it's
Leybourne!" said the Archdeacon, fumbling
at the bolts and lock. "Mamma, what
have those servants been doing to this
door? Why—why, Leybourne—you don't
mean to say—why!"

"Yes, it's Joyce," said Austin, coming in
with Joyce's hand in his. "She is found
at last, you see!"

Joyce was never more astonished than to
find herself caught in the Archdeacon's
arms and held tightly to him, while he
kissed her over and over again. She was
humbled and frightened at the warmth of
his embrace, and when she even felt his
tears upon her forehead she broke down
altogether.

"Oh, uncle!" she sobbed, clinging as she
had never believed it was possible for her

to cling to him, "can you really forgive me? I am more sorry than I can tell."

"God bless you, my love!" he said tenderly, kissing her again. "I never knew how dear Julius's child could be to me, until I thought you had left us for ever."

Still holding her he went to the foot of the stairs, and called out, "Mamma, mamma! come down quickly; there is some one here to see you. Tell the girls; come down all of you."

"Oh dear, who is it? what can it be?" cried Mrs. Hyde, who had been hastily dressing, as she came down the stairs at this moment. "Joyce!" she cried, as she saw the girl.

"Yes, here she is!" said the Archdeacon joyfully. "Ha, ha, ha! where are the girls? Girls, come down!" he added, at the top of his voice, going up a few steps of the stairs,

and calling towards a very audible pattering and rustling at the farther end of the passage.

Joyce and her aunt embraced each other warmly ; but Mrs. Hyde was a great deal too fluttered and excited to say anything coherently, and could only reply to Joyce's " Please forgive me, Aunt Christina ; I am so very sorry," with, " And after being drowned—no, but nearly so, and at this time of night, with snow on the ground too, and are your feet wet, dear ? and the kitchen fire out, I fear, and you must be starving and Mr. Leybourne too !" and Mrs. Hyde went into the kitchen as her daughters, pale and astonished, came downstairs.

" Here's your cousin, girls," cried the Archdeacon, " come back like a ghost in the dead of night, you see. Ha, ha, ha ! But, Leybourne, you haven't told us how you found her yet. Come into the kitchen and

“e if there is a fire!” and the Archdeacon and Austin followed Mrs. Hyde.

Joyce, left alone with her cousins, felt a little awkward. They were all standing in the hall, and the only light came from a bedroom candle in Eanswith’s hand. Joyce scarcely knew how to begin—they were too much dazed by their sudden rousing from sleep and the startling surprise of her appearance to say anything for a moment.

As the Archdeacon turned into the kitchen, Joyce moved towards them. In another moment she was not a little astonished to find Flo’s arms around her neck, and to feel her sob.

“Oh, Flo dear!” she cried, kissing her ;
“I am so sorry.”

“No, no,” said Flo, still sobbing. “Oh Joyce, you must forgive me. I have thought such dreadful things of you.”

her cousins should

cousin's pardon, quite unnerved the girls. Blanche put her arm round Joyce's neck and kissed her with something of a tremble about her lips, and Eanswith was so agitated that she let the bedroom candle fall on its wick on the floor, where it gave one splutter and went out.

"Here we are all in the dark!" cried Joyce merrily, yet blinking very hard to keep back the tears that the sight of Flo's humiliation had brought forth. "Oh girls, it's jolly to be home again. Don't cry, Flo dear; we will never quarrel any more. I am sure it was more my fault than yours. There's Aunt Christina with a light."

"There is a fire," said Mrs. Hyde, coming forward. "So fortunate in having extravagant servants, for it's quite hot there. Do go and get warm, girls; you



will all catch the most dreadful colds : and, Blanche, *do* you know where the key of the store-room is ?”

“ I *think* it was put under the lamp in the dining-room to keep it steady at supper,” said Blanche. “ I’ll go and see.”

“ Do, dear, for they must be famished. My poor child, I can hardly believe you are here yet; but cherry brandy will be the best thing for you after the cold.”

There was a roaring fire in the kitchen, round which they all sat and listened to Austin’s account of the day’s proceedings, and how Joyce had been discovered by the wonderful gun-case, which was handed round to be examined, as if everybody wanted to find out what there was in its appearance that had brought about such a happy reconciliation.

Austin talked more than anybody had ever heard him do before, for he wished to

spare Joyce the necessity of entering an explanation to-night; and he was so amusing, and said such funny things, and gave such comic descriptions, that the Archdeacon was kept in a perpetual roar of laughter, and even the girls forgot their shyness and laughed aloud too. Joyce had never spent such a happy time in Charrington Rectory since she first came there, and was quite sorry to go to bed when towards three o'clock the necessity of her doing so presented itself forcibly to Mrs. Hyde's mind.

It was arranged that she was to sleep with Flo for that night, and Austin was to have the spare room.

"The bed is thoroughly well aired," Mrs. Hyde explained anxiously; "for we expect Aunt Marion to-morrow, so we aire everything to-day."

"Thank you, I am sure it will be
-ight," he answered; and then the p
that remained of the nig'



CHAPTER XII.

THE next morning Austin had a long talk with the Archdeacon in his study, and there he showed him the letter of his Aunt Aspasia that Joyce had found. He felt that it would be pleasanter for him to give this explanation to her uncle than for her to do so; and it certainly did save her a great deal of pain, for she had dreaded that interview above all things.

The Archdeacon was much shocked and distressed, really and unfeignedly so. Austin had never believed that the stern domineering Church dignitary could be so

humbled as he was. His niece's desertion of him and his had made a deeper impression than anyone would have considered possible. It touched him on one of his tenderest points, his strong family feeling. He had hitherto considered it almost impossible for anything to be more perfect in its way than life at Charrington Rectory. That his only brother's only child had actually preferred death or houseless poverty to staying there had given him as rude a shock as any event could have done. It had touched him more nearly than anyone, even his own wife, had dreamt of. Austin was shocked to see how white he had become in so short a time, and how the lines of his face had altered, and even his stalwart shoulders had become bowed a little. Doubtless Robert's marriage had something to do with this, but the primary cause was Joyce. It touches a man's

honour so much more keenly for any of his womenkind to go in any way wrong than for a son to do so.

It was a long story that Austin had to tell, and the telling was not pleasant to him; but it spared Joyce, so he went through all her sad little history which she had confided to him on the journey yesterday, confident that once known the Archdeacon would never allude to it to her. There was little need to explain his own position with regard to her. Considering what had passed between the Archdeacon and himself on a former occasion, there was no need of further discussion on the subject; but the Archdeacon was a little startled at being asked to perform the service in three weeks' time.

"Isn't that just a little sudden?" he asked.

"Oh dear no!" said Austin composedly;

It was all I could do.

Mrs. Leybourne, I assure you. I can—
I am making an immense sacrifice in giving
you three weeks' grace. I warn you I shall
be here every day."

Meanwhile Joyce was having a somewhat similar conversation with her aunt. The girls had all found themselves shy this morning—the Charrington girls felt that there was a mystery about Joyce and her escort, and Joyce longed to tell them of her engagement, but felt too bashful to do so. So they were all rather constrained and uneasy, especially Flo, who would have given the world to be really satisfied as to Joyce's position with Austin Leybourne.

So Joyce wandered into the drawing-room, which was empty, and began warming her hands at the fire, wishing Austin would come out of the study, when presently Mrs. Hyde came in.

"Oh, my dear," she said, carefully shutting the door after her, "I am so glad to find you here. I wanted to speak to you."

"Yes, Aunt Christina," said Joyce, turning very red, while her heart gave a great thump against her ribs.

"Why, my dear," said Mrs. Hyde, somewhat nervously searching for her knitting in a confused work-basket, "the fact is, I—well, we are all rather a little bit curious, perhaps. You are not offended, dear?"

"Oh no, aunt!" said Joyce, her face hotter than ever.

"Well, you see, dear, it did look a little—not that I would say it must mean anything, of course; it may be the merest coincidence—you mustn't think I mean to hint at anything, my love, only it does look—well, just a little, a little—" said Mrs. Hyde, at a loss for a word sufficiently

icate to give her meaning, meaning too much. "Well, just a little—suggestive," said Mrs. Hyde at last.

"What did?" asked Joyce demurely, unable to resist getting a little innocent fun out of her aunt's embarrassment.

"Oh, my dear," cried Mrs. Hyde in despair, "I am *sure* you must know what I mean. Not that I would for a moment hint at anything displeasing to you, dear, and in these cases one cannot be too careful; but perhaps I was mistaken, and should have said nothing. You must not think of it again;" and poor Mrs. Hyde looked quite distressed.

"If you mean am I engaged to Austin Leybourne," said Joyce with the coolest air imaginable and the least possible addition of American accent, giving the fire a little poke at the same time, "why all I can say is, you have stated a genuine fact."

“Oh, my dear child!” cried Mrs. Hyde in great trepidation, “I wouldn’t have suggested such a thing for the world!”

“Why not, Aunt Christina?” said Joyce, vigorously poking at the fire. “It’s true. Don’t you like the idea?”

“Oh, I am sure I am delighted,” said her aunt, her broad face beaming with smiles. “Let me kiss you, my love. I am sure I am very glad indeed, and hope you will be very very happy, and after such a different prospect as we had expected for you—about Sir Ethelred, I mean, but perhaps I ought not to have mentioned him!”

“Why not?” said Joyce again, seeing her aunt looked confused. “Austin is going to ask him to be his best-man, and I am sure he will be. He is always so good-natured, and I am sure he must have quite got over any foolishness about me by

this time. Has not he been here a good deal lately?" asked Joyce slyly.

"Well, really, my dear," said Mrs. Hyde, not quite knowing what to say with Joyce's mischievous eyes upon her, "I really—well, I believe he has. He was *dreadfully* miserable, Joyce."

"Oh, no doubt," said Joyce gaily. "I am sure I hope so, for then Flo could have comforted him so nicely. Now, Aunt Christina, you are not to look shocked, but I am an almighty true prophet, and you had better order two wedding-cakes instead of one, for you will want them."

"Really, my dear!" gasped Mrs. Hyde, as Joyce kissed her hand to her at the door, and ran downstairs to where Austin was calling her.

Mrs. Hyde, left alone by the fire with her knitting, took off her spectacles and wiped them, and then sat with them in her hand for a little while.

"She is a dear affectionate child," she said to herself; "and really it would be very suitable. Dear Flo! I wonder whether he will be best-man after all."

Joyce found Austin putting on his great-coat in the hall.

"I am going over to Shere Court now," he said; "and if I know my mother at all, I prophesy that I shall have to drive over for you directly after dinner and bring you back to see her: so don't run away with anybody in the meantime, or you will disappoint the old lady sadly."

"No, I won't run away," she said. "Oh, Austin, how could I ever have been so wicked as to have done so?" and her eyes filled with tears.

Austin looked down upon the upturned tearful face; he had not the heart to scold her, but he knew that it was due to the Archdeacon and his family that she should

properly appreciate their real goodness to her, so he said :

“What you felt on coming here, dear, was, that there was no liberality of thought or feeling, was it not ? That everyone here was so wrapt up in his or her narrow creed, that there was no place in this respectable home for a wild creature like yourself—wasn’t that it ?”

“Yes, I thought they were so hard,” said Joyce humbly ; “but oh, Austin, how good they are ! they have never said a word to me of the—of the *disgrace* I have been to them,” concluded Joyce, with a sob.

He put his arm round her.

“They never will, darling,” he said. “Real charity and liberality do not always go hand-in-hand with the greatest amount of talk about them ; but they are often to be found among those whose creed and life are of the narrowest and strictest. I



never heard anyone impeach the respectability of the Prodigal's father, yet respectable people are often considered *ex officio* narrow-minded. I won't try and conceal from you, darling, that you acted wrongly—that is, without due consideration for the feelings of others. Hurting other people is the most real wrong that anyone can commit. But this good result has come about, that you will never doubt the genuine goodness of your uncle's family again, dear?"

"I should think not, indeed. Austin, it is dreadful to think what a trouble I have been to everybody!"

"It will be dreadful indeed if you sit down and cry over it," he said in a bright tone, for he saw that his words had made her weep, "instead of trying how happy you can make us all for the future by being happy yourself. You must be our Joy for

ever now, my love ;" and he kissed her and bade her good-bye for a few hours.

They seemed very long hours to Joyce until he appeared again soon after dinner, with the announcement that the roads were impassable for a carriage, and she must walk to Shere Court and stay the night. So she laughingly set off under his protection in the waning of the winter afternoon ; and in what seemed a very short time to them they came within sight of Shere Court.

It bore a very different aspect now to what it had done when she saw it first. The dyke was all frozen and covered with snow, as were also the garden and the wide fields around. Snow lay on the gnarled old willows, and a rimy frost tipped every tiny spray with purest white. Had an enchantment passed over the once sombre old trees they could not have looked more

radiantly lovely, as their glistening boughs stood out against the clearness of the deep blue of the evening sky. Drooping over the frozen water, they were a dream of perfect beauty.

“ Oh, look at the willows !” Joyce cried ;
“ was ever anything so lovely ?”

“ They are draped for your welcome, my sweetest,” said the voice beside her. “ Even the old house has lost its gloom for your sake.”

She turned as he spoke, and looked at it. On the steep roof, and on every curve of the gables, on every window-ledge, and touching every delicate spray of jessamine and creeper, lay the pure white snow and the radiant rime. A flickering light as of fires danced behind all the windows, and shed a broad ruddy streak of red upon the snow from the open door.

“ She has tried to make the old place

look inviting to you, dear, with a tremble in his voice—his mother's eagerness touched him strangely. "It doesn't look such a cheerless, hopeless place as it did, does it, darling?"

"It looks beautiful and lovely!" cried Joyce; "the most homelike place I have ever seen. And oh, Austin darling, there she is! She must not come out!" and Joyce flew down the garden path to be taken in the old woman's arms at the doorway, and to be fondly kissed and welcomed.

They led her all over the house, pointing out to her this and that place, where her father had sat, where he had played with Austin, his favourite corner for reading; and Mrs. Leybourne vied with her son in relating pleasant anecdotes of his youthful days. Great fires had been lighted everywhere, and Joyce's room made so magnificent with long-disused glories of tapestry and o'

silver and rare ornaments, that the girl was quite bewildered by the attention shown her.

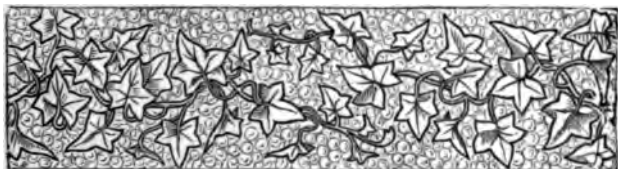
“If I had been a queen she could not have honoured me more,” she said, looking at her lover with glistening eyes as he fondly bade her good-night.

“You are our queen,” he said. “This is the beginning of a new reign. My mother has formally abdicated, and she will be the happier for it. She is too old for the cares of sovereignty, and wants some one to pet. You heard how anxious she was to get your opinion on the subject of new papers and carpets. To-morrow comes my turn. My time has not been wasted in London, little friend. I have been working at Greenwich between whiles, and as soon as you can help me with my papers all will be ready. Perhaps you will find your husband a famous man after all,” he added, kissing her.

“That will be best of all,” she cried eagerly. “Oh, Austin, can I really help you?”

“As no one else can. Now, good-night, little Joy ; I hear my mother hovering about your door upstairs. Sleep well in your own house, little queen.”





CHAPTER XIII.

“**O**H dear,” said Miss Sackett, as she stumbled in great agitation into one of a string of carriages outside Charrington churchyard, “I never saw anything so beautiful in my life and everything gone off so well, though no reason why it shouldn’t I am sure, and I declare, Mary, you are sitting on my cap, but I never was so delighted in my life!” and she dried her eyes for the hundredth time.

“And to see all the dear girls there in white like angels, and though I say it and no one could be fonder of dear Flo, but really although so little, the most lovely

creature and white satin so exquisite, not but what the white cashmere was not equally well in its way."

"And the fur trimmings so very becoming," said Miss Sackett, as soon as Miss Mary paused for breath, for both ladies talked with even more than their usual rapidity, and totally ignored such superfluities as stops in their conversation; "but there, everything was lovely, and here is Mrs. Johnstone, and to think of Sir Ethelred lending us his own carriage, and did you ever see anything more lovely in all your life? I declare I am quite upset."

"Oh, I dare say it was pretty enough," said Mrs. Johnstone, to whom this last observation was addressed, as she got into the carriage with the other ladies; "but for my part, I don't understand such a display at a wedding, and everybody knowing they

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“ Oh but really !” cried both the ladies ; and then Miss Sackett continued : “ But not such a great expense either, I know the dear girls’ dresses were most inexpensive, although so sweetly, sweetly pretty. Dear Mrs. Hyde told me herself, though perhaps I ought not to say it, and the fur tippets and cuffs a present from the bridegroom, and most considerate I must say in December, and with snow on the ground, and nothing could be more becoming.”

“ And the Archdeacon insisted on the white satin *himself*,” added Miss Mary, “ so it must be all right, and the lace from Mrs. Leybourne, and I am sure I never saw anything more exquisite in my life ; and the pearls, did you see the pearls from Sir Ethelred ?”

“ Oh, I saw them, of course. They are big enough to be seen. A pretty sum of money they must have cost him, poor

fellow. I wonder she had the impudence to flaunt them before his very face !”

“ Well but really after such a present not to wear it quite insulting,” cried Miss Sackett, “and I am sure I thought it quite charming to see what good friends they are, and so nice for him to be best-man—shows such good feeling all round, and nothing could be prettier than her manner to him.”

“ So very——” began Miss Mary, and was cut short by Mrs. Johnstone’s snappish remark :

“ Pretty manner indeed, after leading the poor young man on in the shameful manner she did, and then throwing him over !”

“ Oh but that couldn’t be,” said Miss Sackett eagerly again, “for Lady Ashton herself is here, and of course she couldn’t come if that was the case, and I saw her kiss the bride myself in the vestry—so kind of dear Joyce, Mrs. Austin



Leybourne I mean, to insist on our coming in too, quite as if we belonged to the family. I never was more upset in my life."

"Quite too kind," put in Miss Mary before Mrs. Johnstone could open her lips, "and quite a crush too, I trembled for her lovely dress, though so glad to get a near view of her, and never shed a tear, which is always so extremely trying in a bride or a bridesmaid either, and though it may be very improper, Martha and I cried like anything, though I hope nobody saw it, but it was quite more than I could stand, or either of us, so much beauty and happiness;" and both the tender-hearted old maids wept again.

"For goodness' sake stop that crying now," snapped Mrs. Johnstone, surveying them in much disgust. "I should like to know what *you* find to cry at?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Miss

Sackett, wiping her eyes ; "but all so very happy you know, and such a pleasure to witness, and I am sure so much excitement since we first heard of it and received the invitation, so much more than we could expect, you know, and driving off to Moulbury at once."

"In such a fever about the dressmaker," chimed in Miss Mary, "such a busy time of the year and not regular customers either, and so anxious to get the right thing, but so difficult to choose, and thought purple, but most fortunately hinted to dear Joyce, Mrs. Austin Leybourne, our perplexity, and went with us and chose these greys and nothing could be more becoming or delightful, so subdued yet not gloomy."

"And so suitable to our age and so much more ladylike than purple, yet still anxious about outer covering, silk being thin but afraid cashmere shawls would look old-

fashioned and wouldn't for the world disgrace such an occasion by our costume, but dear Joyce, Mrs. Austin Leybourne, quite delighted. They were our mother's, of course we could never have bought anything so expensive, and really I must say very handsome."

"Oh, you both look well enough," said Mrs. Johnstone hastily. "Very suitable indeed, but it was rather a liberty of Joyce to dictate to you about your costume for her own wedding, I must say."

"Oh dear, you *quite* mistake!" cried both the ladies in great distress. "It was the greatest kindness possible, such a relief to our minds."

"Well, well, it's lucky you think so," said the little woman, giving herself a shake that produced a sharp metallic clatter and startled the Miss Sacketts into thinking the horses were going to run away.

But there was little chance of their doing that with the snow so deep on the ground that they could only walk at a foot-pace all the way from the church to the Rectory. It would have been a cold drive, but there were plenty of wraps and hot-water tins in all the carriages.

There was silence for a few minutes in the carriage that held the Miss Sacketts and Mrs. Johnstone, but Miss Martha broke it as they came to the wide hop-garden, now a billowy mass of white.

"To think," she observed pensively, "that we came along this very road holding her hat, and crying I am sure fit to break our hearts, and thinking of her down among the weeds, and how to face the Archdeacon, and how we did I don't know, and that it has all come to this."

"So very different," murmured Miss Mary in sympathy, "and I am sure I wish

we had never found it. I never shall forget the Archdeacon, never, it wakes me up at night now sometimes that we should have witnessed such a thing. I am sure it was weeks before I could look him in the face. Men are so different to women, and might be annoyed at our witnessing such dreadful emotion. It was very awkward."

"Quite heart-breaking; I am sure I never slept for weeks," said Miss Sackett, with a little sniff of recalled emotion; "and now to think only a few carriages ahead of us in the most beautiful lace and pearls and with a husband. Oh dear, it's quite too!" and Miss Sackett buried her face in her handkerchief.

"Oh, don't, sister!" cried Miss Mary, with two large tears trickling down her cheeks, "don't give way so or you will never be fit to sit at the table, and all past and gone now, and I declare a spot on your

new grey and I am sure I hope it won't be noticed."

"Yes, for goodness' sake, stop!" ejaculated Mrs. Johnstone in some disgust. "One would think you were miserable, to see the state you are in."

"I am sure," gasped Miss Sackett, making a strenuous effort to subdue her tears, "I am only too, too, too happy."

"Well, look so then!" snapped Mrs. Johnstone.

"Yes, do cheer up, sister," said Miss Mary anxiously. "I dare say with a little cold water it will be all right, and so much as we have to be thankful for, and if I am not very much mistaken more too."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Johnstone, noticing Miss Mary's very expressive glance out of the window in the direction of the foremost carriages.

"Oh, well, really, perhaps I ought not

to mention it," said Miss Mary, blushing all over her faded old face. "Not that I have heard so much as a single word, but Martha and I both think it so very, very likely."

"And I am sure most desirable and suitable in every way," added Miss Sackett quite brightly, putting her handkerchief away. "Nothing could be more so, and what we have hoped from the very first, but thought quite out of the question until lately."

"And though of course we congratulated when we understood otherwise," said Miss Mary eagerly, "still we owned to being a little disappointed, though I hope never mentioned it, but now everything so much more suitable and delightful."

"What are the women talking of?" cried Mrs. Johnstone, in despair. "Can't you speak one at a time, and say what you mean, instead of going on like that one

after the other like the sails of a wind-mill? What are you talking about?"

"Why, dear Flo, of course," said Miss Mary, in great astonishment at not being perfectly comprehended the whole time. "Who else should we say such a thing of? And, as I said, mentioned before though mistaken for a time."

"But certain it will all come right now," added Miss Sackett, seeing that Mrs. Johnstone looked still mystified; "though of course nothing quite settled yet as far as we know, but not to be mistaken this time, or attentions most marked, though so very delicate and chief bridesmaid too."

"Quite thrown together," put in Miss Mary explanatorily; "and for my part I believe Joyce, Mrs. Austin Leybourne, contrived it so on purpose, else why not dear Eanswith, so much the eldest, and naturally first bridesmaid, but done on

purpose I am sure, and nothing could be more thoughtful and considerate."

"Bless the women!" cried Mrs. Johnstone, fairly exasperated. "I do believe you mean something about Sir Ethelred and Flo."

"Of course we do," cried both the ladies; "and everybody must have seen it and what could be more delightful?"

"Well, she will be better for him than that saucy little minx," said Mrs. Johnstone thoughtfully; "though I think myself he might look higher than a country parson's daughter, and of course if she likes to take her cousin's leavings she may!"

"Look higher than one of the Hydes!" cried Miss Sackett, aghast; while Miss Mary added, "And I am sure if never engaged, there can be no question of leavings on either side."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Johnstone, as they drove in at the Rectory gates. "It's no business of mine."

"Certainly not," said gentle Miss Sackett, bridling up at the aspersion cast upon her objects of devotion; "but I am sure every *friend* of the dear girls, and no liberty taken in saying so for were actually called so to our faces only yesterday, must feel a pleasure in so suitable a match, two matches if I may say so."

"And I declare!" cried Miss Mary, drawing her head in from the carriage-window, through which she had thrust it to watch the bridesmaids descend at the door, "I do declare I believe he has done it now, the dear girl is one blush, and they had the small brougham all to themselves you know, and was ever anything more thoughtful!"

"No, you don't say so!" cried Miss

Sackett, in the wildest excitement, thrusting her head out of the opposite window, "and that was dear Joyce's, Mrs. Leybourne's, doing, I know, for I heard her give the order myself, and it must be so, for he is looking as happy as a king."

"And so brotherly to dear Eanswith and Blanche. He is helping them out," said Miss Mary, withdrawing her head; "well I do call this something quite too delightful! But I wish poor dear Mr. Robert could have been here to see it all."

THE END.

[REDACTED]

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